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# **Critiquing the thin ideal in pro-anorexia online spaces**

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**CRITIQUING THE THIN IDEAL IN PRO-ANOREXIA ONLINE SPACES**

**SUMMARY**

The thin body has long been considered 'normal' in Western culture, whereas the anorexic body has been framed as pathological despite the fact that both bodies often engage in regimes of undereating and extreme exercising which dovetail with one another. Pro-anorexia (or 'pro-ana') online spaces, which emerged in the late twentieth century, have been criticised for their espousal of anorexia even though much of the advice they provide and the images they collate, derive from mainstream culture. Censorship and vilification by the media have meant that since their inception these spaces have undergone a number of changes. This thesis therefore investigates the thin ideal in pro-ana online spaces at a time when the boundaries between the mainstream espousal of thinness and the body image promoted in pro-ana culture are becoming increasingly blurred.

Drawing on empirical research across a range of websites, forums, and social media which identify as pro-ana, I employ textual analysis to explore how thinness is constructed in these spaces. My investigation produced a set of themes which shape this thesis. Central were: the denial and disguise of disordered-eating practices; the pre-eminence of the white, middle-class, heterofeminine body; and the importance of pain in realising the thin ideal. The central claim of this thesis is that pro-ana online spaces expose the extent to which normative femininity is underpinned by practices which may be deeply disordered, but they are viewed as normal by mainstream culture. Pro-ana culture illustrates an extreme response to achieving thinness but it also critiques the ideal to which it aspires. Hence, this thesis concludes by turning to the potential for resistance in pro-ana online spaces and arguing that although they do not uncritically conform to the culture of compulsory thinness, they are nonetheless postfeminist enclaves which perpetuate the primacy of the individual.

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## Introduction: 'Girls in Danger'

### Introduction

In the summer of 2001, *The Observer* published an article on the risks posed by pro-anorexia sites, specifically to 'vulnerable girls' (Hill 2001, p.10). It would become but one of many pieces to incite panic around the burgeoning pro-anorexia phenomenon, and it typifies the kind of reporting the subject continues to attract to this day. The headline, 'Girls in danger as anorexics give weight-loss tips on web' (ibid.), suggests young women are in danger from other young women: the anorexic is both at risk and the risk itself. Today, media reporting on the threat of the visible anorexic body continues to follow a similar narrative. In a recent article on emaciated YouTube celebrity Eugenia Cooney, *The Express* asked, 'Would you want YOUR daughter idolising this stick-thin YouTube star?' (Delgado 2016). The article reiterates the danger this young woman presents to other young women and cites a petition calling for Cooney to be banned from YouTube. In short, articles such as these suggest that the anorexic body is a threat and it must be hidden away in order to protect the young women who are ever-susceptible to its influence.

It is not only misleading media reporting that demands pro-anorexia online spaces are given sustained critical investigation, but cultural understandings of femininity as alternately dangerous and in need of protection which underpin the phenomenon. In this thesis, I will call into account such misconceptions by analysing pro-anorexia online spaces in relation to everyday understandings of compulsory thinness. To do so I focus on a range of sources across pro-anorexia culture, as well as the mainstream construction of the thin ideal.

The title of this thesis therefore operates in two ways: the study constitutes a critique of thinness as an ideal, and simultaneously argues that pro-anorexia online spaces, in their veneration of the thin body, have the potential to expose the culture of compulsory

thinness which pervades everyday life. The central claim of this thesis is that pro-anorexia online spaces reveal the blurred boundaries between so-called ‘disordered’ and ‘normal’ body practices.

### **Context and contribution to knowledge**

Pro-anorexia, or ‘pro-ana’<sup>1</sup>, as it will be called hereafter is an online phenomenon which operates across a raft of websites, forums and social media. Although pro-ana online spaces have no singular aim, broadly speaking they operate to provide users with support on living with *anorexia nervosa*. This ranges from recovery advice, through to ‘tips and tricks’ on how to successfully starve, and ‘thinspiration’, a portmanteau of ‘thin’ and ‘inspiration’, also contracted to ‘thinspo’. Thinspo comprises the posting of images of thin models, celebrities, and users themselves with the intention of inspiring weight loss.

Pro-ana online spaces emerged towards the end of the twentieth century and they remain to this day (Burke 2012), however, as this thesis will demonstrate, their form has altered considerably. In line with scholars across the disciplines, I work from the following position: that pro-ana online spaces reject the medical model of passive suffering (Bell, 2009; Day and Keys 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Gailey 2009) creating an active phenomenon which continually adapts (Polak 2010, p.85) and refuses erasure (Ferreday 2003, p.293; 2009). Pro-ana online has been likened to a ‘sanctuary’ and safe space for anorectics (Dias 2003), a form of ‘social capital’ (Tierney 2008) and a ‘secret society’ where support is given and friendships are formed (Cantó-Milà and Seebach 2011). As Sarah R. Brotsky and David Giles conclude, ‘it seems that the support on offer on pro-ana websites is – for all the scare stories about “purging tips” and users egging one another on with their latest BMIs – little more than sympathetic

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Pro-ana’ is the truncated form of pro-anorexia and has been adopted by users and commentators alike.

companionship in a safe, anonymous and largely sympathetic environment' (2007, p.106).

This thesis makes an original intervention into the field in two key ways. The first contribution to knowledge is methodological. This research captures pro-ana culture during its tipping point where it shifted from discussion-based forums and websites to more image-centric social media, all the while being subject to censorship and deletion by Internet moderators. This meant my methods continually adapted in order to keep up with a phenomenon which constantly altered its rhetoric and denied its pro-ana status. At the same time, a large part of the data captured and analysed in this thesis has since been removed, either by Internet moderators or users themselves. As such, this study constitutes the preservation of an important cultural artefact: the transient phenomenon of pro-ana.

In attempts to safeguard their spaces, users adopt discourses of health and beauty, for instance. Such tactics have led to their spaces becoming increasingly normalised, as they have begun to merge with mainstream thinness culture. This blurring of the boundaries between disordered and normative practices informs the second contribution to knowledge this research makes: I locate the pro-ana phenomenon within the broader landscape of postfeminist neoliberalism. That is, rather than positioning it as either pathological or to be celebrated, I argue that pro-ana culture is exemplary of the contradictory demands on twenty-first century femininity perpetrated by postfeminism.

### **Scope of thesis**

This thesis interrogates pro-ana culture by undertaking textual analysis across a broad range of websites, forums, and social media spaces which identify as pro-ana. Pro-ana online spaces are dynamic and this thesis constitutes a snapshot in time of a phenomenon which is continually evolving. As such, my analysis is not exhaustive.

Owing to continuous censorship, many of the spaces I discuss in this thesis have since disappeared or were forcibly removed during the research process. However, the transience of pro-ana online is what shapes its culture and a principal aim of this thesis is to capture and faithfully represent a phenomenon which has been cloaked in controversy and hampered by censorship.

This thesis is about women. Although anorexia is by no means exclusive to young girls, the data this study yielded suggests that *pro-anorexia* is. My argument is not that men cannot be anorexic, but that contemporary Western culture frames anorexia as a specifically female concern because it is on a continuum with normative femininity (Bordo 1989, [1993] 2003; Malson 1998; Wolf 1991). As UK eating disorder charity, Beat, states on its website:

Young women are most likely to develop an eating disorder, particularly those aged 12 to 20, but older women and men of all ages can also have an eating disorder. Children as young as seven can develop anorexia and there is a greater proportion of boys in this younger age group. (2016)

Eating disorders may affect people of all ages and genders but, as I showed above, the media response to pro-ana has been decidedly gendered, focusing on the threat such sites present to *young women*. Consequently, I argue that both the representation of pro-ana culture by the media and the content within the spaces themselves bring to the fore understandings of women's position in contemporary Western culture.

Despite this, during the research process I did discover pro-ana tips and thinspo intended for men, however they did not sit under the general banner of pro-anorexia and had to be specifically sought out. That is to say, in my preliminary searches, very little content arose which addressed men's disordered eating (whether in forum threads or image boards), but when I undertook searches for 'male pro-ana' and 'male thinspo' for example, the results were plentiful. I argue that the separating of male pro-ana from the main body of pro-ana texts is reflective of culturally-dominant beliefs that men do not suffer from eating disorders and those that do are deemed non-normative (see

Herzog, Bradburn, and Newman 1990). In the spaces examined in this study, a female subject was simply assumed; this thesis therefore seeks to unpack such assumptions.

## **Research questions**

In order to examine what pro-ana online spaces reveal about the thin ideal in contemporary Western culture, this thesis is framed by the following research questions:

- 1) How is the thin body constructed as an ideal in contemporary Western culture?
  - a) What are the discourses that contribute towards an exaltation of thinness?
- 2) In what ways do mainstream and pro-anorexia cultures accommodate one another?
  - a) Do pro-anorexia online spaces critique the everyday demands made upon the female body?
- 3) How might pro-anorexia serve as a tool for interrogating contemporary femininity?

## **Structure of thesis**

This thesis is organised into six central chapters, an introduction and conclusion. Chapters one and two are contextual, chapters three, four, five, and six are analysis chapters. Each analysis chapter deals with the material landscape of pro-anorexia, is thematic, and is dictated by the findings from my data. As a result, I have eschewed a traditional literature review at the start of the thesis (although this section is followed by a review of pro-ana scholarship) and instead each chapter begins with its own literature review of the theoretical trajectory it follows.

Chapter One, 'Disciplining the female body: medicine, maladies, and *anorexia nervosa*', begins with a historical approach to the inception of the medical gaze during the Enlightenment, after which it examines the impact this has had upon the female body. I attend to the way in which the medical gaze is played out in contemporary

understandings of eating disorders, examining the key debates in anorexia. This chapter demonstrates how medical discourse operates as a form of control. That is, by concealing ideologies of body-management under the veil of personal responsibility and moral obligation, the population is rendered compliant. Finally, this chapter explores such contentions through the lens of the pro-ana phenomenon.

Chapter Two, 'Disciplining the female body: contemporary UK women's magazines', builds upon the notion of masquerade explored in chapter one and identifies the context in which pro-ana online spaces are situated. To do this I undertake textual analysis of a set of contemporary UK women's magazines. I argue that such texts operate under a guise of friendliness and support which obfuscates their will to body disciplining, a device which I argue in later chapters is brought to the fore by pro-ana culture. As well as empirical research, this chapter operates as a practical exploration of the core critical framework that frames this thesis, that of postfeminist neoliberalism. Taking women's magazines as a starting point, I analysis the way this framework underpins contemporary women's culture.

Chapter Three, 'This is *not* pro-ana': in search of the pro-anorexia landscape', sets out my research methodology and is also the first of my analysis chapters. It interrogates the changes that have taken place in pro-ana online spaces since their inception at the end of the twentieth century. I look briefly at the history of pro-ana online before moving on to an investigation of the current landscape. As well as a section devoted to methodology, throughout this chapter I explore how the methodological and ethical hurdles I encountered when embarking upon this research actually became findings themselves. Finally, I draw on theories of postfeminist neoliberalism to illuminate how the phenomenon is becoming increasingly normalised.

Chapter Four, 'Intersectional privilege in pro-ana online spaces', builds upon my claims to normalisation. Common sense understandings of anorexia as a solely white, middle-class, heterofeminine concern have long been contested (Bordo 2009, pp. 48-49;



Malson and Burns 2009; Nasser and Malson, 2009; Saukko 2009), however, pro-ana online spaces suggest otherwise. Following a concise review of the relevant scholarship on intersectionality, this chapter explores pro-ana culture's appropriation of mainstream images and discourses around the thin ideal. In short, I argue that pro-ana online spaces expose the extent to which the culture of compulsory thinness operates around privileged social categories.

Chapter Five, 'Painful femininity', turns to the role of pain and suffering in pro-anorexia online spaces. This chapter asks if suffering is integral to normative femininity. To do so, it explores the cultural-historical context from which painful femininity emerges, arguing that pro-ana users draw on such cultural representations to express their suffering. I suggest that pain is discursively produced in two ways in pro-ana culture: either as self-destructive, through allusions to depression and self-harm, or, conversely, through understandings that suffering is ultimately beneficial, and necessary for self-betterment. The discussion closes by questioning the opportunities for resistance in these spaces. This leads to the final analysis chapter which explores the potential of pro-ana online to destabilise the status quo.

Chapter Six, 'From counterhegemonic to counterpublic? The political potential of pro-anorexia', takes the contradictory nature of pro-ana online as a starting point and asks if this controversial phenomenon has the potential to form a counterpublic movement. After reviewing the literature on counterpublics, I undertake a case study analysis of a selection of women-led publics. This informs my ensuing critical enquiries into pro-ana culture where I explore whether it can be read as a movement capable of redressing current understandings of not only anorexia, but the culture of compulsory thinness. I ask if the counterhegemonic aspects of these spaces might be mobilised to form a counterpublic capable of disrupting gendered ideals of thinness. This chapter closes by drawing together the postfeminist and the counterpublic elements of pro-ana culture.

## Existing scholarship on pro-ana online spaces

This section offers a brief critical discussion of the existing scholarship on pro-ana online spaces. The phenomenon has received critical consideration across a number of academic disciplines including for instance, sociology, feminist media studies, health psychology, and computer science. For the purposes of this study, I have divided the scholarship into two broad sections: health science perspectives (including psychology), and feminist and socio-cultural perspectives. My reason for approaching the literature in this way is because the majority of studies have emerged from the health sciences<sup>2</sup> and, as I have stated, this thesis locates pro-ana culture within contemporary understandings of gender.

As I pointed out earlier, pro-ana spaces do not have one overriding aim. It is important to acknowledge, as do Katy Day and Tammy Keys (2009), that pro-ana spaces are 'heterogeneous and [...] serving a number of sometimes conflicting purposes' (p.88). Further, 'the voice of pro-ana is not homogeneous and therefore should not be collapsed in to a uniform group' (Strife and Rickard 2011, p.216; see also Miah and Rich 2008, p.92; Yom-Tov et al 2016). Notwithstanding, as *The Observer* and *Express Online* articles cited above demonstrate, the response to these spaces by the mainstream media has been one of moral panic, treating pro-ana spaces as monolithic and calling for deletion, which is simply not constructive (Ferreday 2003, 2009; Miah and Rich 2008; Polak 2010; Pollack 2003; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013). The nervousness around these spaces, however, is not limited to media reporting, and research within the health sciences and psychology has tended to take the phenomenon's assumed threat as a starting point. Hence, it is to this research which I turn first.

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<sup>2</sup> See Casilli, Tubaro and Araya (2012) for a detailed breakdown of the disciplinary fields in which the pro-ana phenomenon has been examined.

### **Health science perspectives**

A number of scholars working within health sciences have set out to investigate the risks pro-ana online spaces present to non-users (Bardone-Cone and Cass 2006; Custers and Van den Bulck 2009; Jett, LaPorte and Wanchisn 2010). Others have attempted to quantify the spaces' harm levels (Borzekowski et al 2010; Lapinski 2006; Lewis and Arbuthnott 2012), even if they were ultimately unable 'to confirm or disconfirm the harmful effects of pro-ED websites that have been announced in the popular press' (Rouleau and von Ranson 2011, p.531). Such research continually positions pro-ana online spaces as potentially hazardous, thus correlating with the media panic around the phenomenon. For instance, although Linda C. Andrist does critique wider cultural imperatives to thinness, she nonetheless refuses to insert references to pro-ana sites in her article 'because of the potential danger' they carry, to which she adds: 'unfortunately, readers who want to find these sites can do so easily' (2003, p.121).

Likewise, a report in *The Lancet* notes the importance of raising awareness around eating disorders, yet expresses concerns that drawing attention to pro-ana sites could increase their use (Christodoulou 2012, p.110). Similar concerns were documented by Carolien Martijn et al (2009); recognising the unfeasibility of outright censorship, they conclude instead that featuring warning texts before pro-ana sites is an effective strategy for reducing the sites' 'potential harmful effects on naïve viewers' (Martijn et al 2009, p.144). Nonetheless, they do not address the practicalities of identifying pro-ana sites in the first place. More recently, Megan A. Moreno et al (2016) have called for Instagram to improve their Content Advisory warnings so as to protect users from potentially harmful material (see also Chancellor et al 2016). However, as I argue throughout this thesis, the lines between pro-ana and the everyday espousal of thinness are increasingly blurred. Invariably a pro-ana space may disguise itself as a health motivation blog for instance, or women's magazine may borrow from pro-ana

discourse (chapter three attends to this in detail). Thus, classifying spaces as pro-ana or not would be a herculean and endless task.

Anna M. Bardone-Cone and Kamila M. Cass (2006), who argue that pro-ana sites have a negative impact on users, advocate for censorship on the individual level. They urge parents to ‘use the technology available to ‘block’ pro-ana websites from being viewed on home computers, or to place home computers with Internet access in a public part of their home where monitoring could occur’ (Bardone-Cone and Cass 2006, p.261). Their recommendations are paternalistic and assume that users of pro-ana sites are exclusively young people who live with their parents and are not technologically savvy enough to find such sites by any means. Interestingly, eight years later the design of this study was replicated by Monique J. Delforterie et al who conclude that, on the contrary, ‘viewing a pro-ana website might *not* have detrimental effects on body satisfaction, positive and negative affect, or appearance self-efficacy in young, *normal* weight women’ (2014, p.334, emphases added). Although the paper concedes that pro-ana sites may not be as dangerous as initially expected, it nonetheless perpetuates the fallacious binary of what is a ‘normal’ weight and what is not.

In spite of this, some research within the health sciences has emphasised the agency pro-ana culture affords its users (Crowe and Watts 2014) and its opportunities for identity-building (Fox, Ward and O’Rourke 2005; Giles and Newbold 2011; Smith, Wickes, and Underwood 2015). Further, as David C. Giles and Julie Newbold point out, in some spaces new members must go through strict initiation processes in order to assess the authenticity of their claims to being pro-ana: those found to be, ‘a mere “wannabe,” or, worse still, a “normal” or a “dieter”’ (2011, p.420) will be frozen out. Emma Bond (2012), however, concludes that pro-ana sites reinforce disordered-eating as an identity and bullying is commonplace.

Nonetheless, scholars working from health science perspectives generally agree that healthcare professionals and caregivers must listen to the pro-anorexic voice if they are to better understand both the phenomenon and anorexia itself (Brotsky and Giles 2007; Csipke and Horne 2007; Custers and Van den Bulck 2009; Gale et al 2016; Gooldin, 2008; Harshbarger et al 2009; Norris et al 2006; Oksanen et al 2015; Tierney 2008; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013; Yom-Tov et al 2012). Antonio Casilli, Fred Pailler, and Paola Tubaro warn that censorship can only lead to pro-ana spaces being driven further underground and becoming entirely inaccessible to healthcare givers and policy makers (2013, p.95).

Although I do not deny the importance of such professionals, and of parents and caregivers, having a better understanding of the pro-ana phenomenon – indeed they must be part of the conversation – my contention is that it cannot be reduced to a clinical issue. If healthcare professionals need an understanding of the phenomenon to inform their work, then equally I argue do those who work in the media and fashion industries. As Susan Bordo rightly points out, ‘the prevailing medical wisdom about eating disorders has failed, over and over, to acknowledge, finally and decisively, that we are dealing here with a *cultural* problem’ (2009, p.53). Pro-ana online spaces and much of the research surrounding them underscores this more than ever. Now, I turn to the feminist and social-cultural literature on the subject.

### **Feminist and socio-cultural perspectives**

Although existing research on pro-ana within health science has undoubtedly provided important insights into the phenomenon, many of its recommendations are reductive insofar as they situate pro-ana as an isolated problem, rather than part of a culture underpinned by compulsory thinness. As such, my primary claim – a claim that provides the motivation for this thesis – is that pro-anorexia and mainstream culture are irrevocably entwined. In their overview of academic writing on the pro-eating disorder phenomenon, Casilli, Tubaro and Araya (2012) found a dearth of gender studies

research, even though Karen Dias's (2003) feminist approach to pro-ana sites was one of the most cited pieces of work (Casilli, Tubaro and Araya 2012, p.133). What this suggests is the simultaneous need for and importance of gender studies research into pro-ana online spaces. The purpose of this thesis is to begin to address this gap.

During the early days of pro-ana sites, Deborah Pollack published an article asking what should be the feminist response to the phenomenon, suggesting that it 'can be seen as a line of flight', as an affront to oppressive structures (2003, p.249). At the same time, she urged us to be careful not to 'create new possibilities for the pro-anorexic subject to become a symbolic martyr' (ibid.). Day and Keys responded directly to Pollack's call, concurring that 'feminist theorists should also be hesitant about romanticizing pro-eating disorder websites as political statements' (2009, p.94). In their research, Day and Keys highlight the contradictory nature of pro-ana sites, arguing that users both comply with and resist feminine beauty ideals (2008a, 2008b, 2009). Thus, feminist scholarship on the pro-ana phenomenon has drawn attention to its capacity to destabilise the status quo.

Dias reads it as parodying impossible ideals of thinness (2003, p.42) and locates it within third-wave feminism. Debra Ferreday suggests the phenomenon is 'challenging what it sees as the hypocrisy of a society that positions anorexics as sick, while continually celebrating and displaying extremely thin bodies' (2003, p.286). Equally, Natalie Boero and C.J. Pascoe suggest that framing these sites as a problem 'is also a way to deflect attention from larger cultural messages around eating and body size found in mainstream media outlets which are not so different from the ones promulgated on these sites' (2012, p.36). They argue that in the haste to repudiate and remove pro-ana online spaces, they are not being adequately explored (ibid.; see also Miah and Rich 2008, p.92). By undertaking sustained critical investigation of the phenomenon, this thesis seeks, in a small way, to remedy this concern.

Other feminist research on pro-ana culture takes a somewhat celebratory approach. For Michele Polak it is 'more powerful than anything [she has] ever seen before online' and deserves recognition (2010, p.85). Further, Jeannine A. Gailey (2009) argues that pro-ana users 'have become active participants in deciding how they will hurt rather than succumbing to passive gender role stereotypes' (p.106). Mebbie Bell (2012), however, is more measured, insisting that: 'instead of a polarized reading of pro-anorexia as either 'good' or 'bad', [...] pro-anorexia must be read as pro-anas often insist: as a struggle, individually contextualized within and against medical discourse' (p.158). Nonetheless, feminist scholars agree that censorship is futile, with Nicole Danielle Schott and Debra Langan (2015) for instance, suggesting that Tumblr's public service announcements to warn viewers of pro-ana content merely reinforce patriarchal control over women.

Whilst scholars may see feminist potential in the phenomenon, Eliza Burke views it 'as *symptomatic* of the same power structures that feminists have argued help to produce anorexia in the first place' (2012, p.51). Furthermore, Su Holmes argues that because of pro-ana users' individualism, they have 'no clear affinity with the feminist approaches which persistently foreground the culture-bound nature of eating disorders' (2015 p.116). It is significant that Holmes is writing later than other scholars for, as I outline in chapter three, pro-ana online spaces have changed substantially over the past decade and their political potential has certainly been stymied. Burke emphasises the importance of 'ask[ing] new questions about the nature of this production as anorexia occupies new fields of representation' (2012, p.51). This is what this thesis seeks to do: it strives to develop new understandings of the pro-anorexia phenomenon within contemporary feminism.

## A note on language

Pro-ana online is a vast phenomenon which operates across a number of online platforms and as a result, produces a considerable amount of data. For a researcher, this is both a blessing and a curse, and I consequently had to make a number of decisions from the outset in order to render this project manageable. A key decision was around language. Pro-ana is often linked to ‘pro-mia’, the truncated form of pro-bulimia, which is used to indicate that a person is actively bulimic.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, as Andy Miah and Emma Rich (2008) found, spaces which espouse disordered eating tend to focus more on anorexia than bulimia, and use pro-ana as an umbrella term. Consequently, throughout this thesis I refer to spaces as pro-ana, rather than pro-mia, or ‘pro-ED’, for example, the truncated form of ‘pro-eating disorders’ which arguably may appear more representative, but is used much less.

Pro-ana is the term which, to draw on Sara Ahmed (2004), has *stuck*. Ahmed says that ‘the association between words that generate meanings is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value* (2004, p.92, emphasis in original). Pro-ana has become a term which conceals other meanings within it, such as deviance and pathology. However, as I explore in detail in chapter three, it has, in recent times, become separate from the other key term which occurs throughout this thesis: thinspo. Although thinspo finds its origins in pro-ana culture, its deviancy is being buried and it is coming to mean simply that one is inspired by an image of thinness without necessarily having an eating disorder. Nonetheless as Ahmed (2004, p.93) points out, signs are ‘sticky’ and thus resistant to ‘cutting’. Cleaving pro-ana and thinspo then is not so easily achieved. As a result, pro-ana and thinspo were the key terms that guided this research and enabled me to set the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the American Psychiatric Association, *bulimia nervosa* comprises the act of binge eating followed by practices to prevent weight gain, such as vomiting (2013, p.345).



boundaries of this project, albeit with the confidence that I was capturing a broad range of data.

As will become clear as this thesis progresses, pro-ana online spaces have their own rhetoric: this is partly a result of attempts to circumvent censorship, and partly a means of creating a sense of exclusivity within the group. For instance, I regularly refer to alternative spellings of thinspo, such as 'thynspo' and 'thinspoooo', as well as other terms users have coined. Furthermore, users adopt the terms 'Ana' and 'Mia' as both nouns and adjectives, thereby indicating the extent to which eating disorders have pervaded their identities, stating for instance, 'I am Ana'. Another term which arises regularly is 'ednos', the acronym for 'Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified' (American Psychiatric Association 2000, p.594).<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this thesis I refer to the thin ideal using a variety of terms, including the slender ideal and hegemonic thinness. I use these terms interchangeably to evoke thinness which contains a number of requirements which are classed, raced, and gendered, for as I argue in chapter four, it is not enough just to be thin. Intrinsic to ideal thinness is respectability, and as Beverley Skeggs reminds us 'a respectable body is White, desexualized, heterofeminine and usually middle-class' (1997, p. 82).

Finally, as I explain in detail in the methodology section which appears in chapter three, in the interests of data protection I have provided sites and forums, and forum threads with pseudonyms and paraphrased all direct quotes. Nonetheless, care has been taken to ensure the original meaning is maintained, and as a result, many of these quotations are still colloquial in style, feature abbreviations, and online chat acronyms. This was

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<sup>4</sup> The fourth edition, text revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental of Disorders* describes EDNOS as follows: 'for disorders of eating that do not meet the criteria for any specific Eating Disorder' (American Psychiatric Association 2000, p.594). However, in the most recent publication of the *DSM*, EDNOS has been renamed 'Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder' (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p.353). EDNOS is still popularly used in pro-ana online spaces.

an important decision in remaining faithful to the text and the users who produced them, whilst still protecting their identity.

### **Motivations and self-reflection**

Before I begin the main body of this thesis, I would like to take some time to set out my own motivations for undertaking this research and to state where I am personally located in the phenomenon of pro-ana. Although I believe it is important to disclose such information, I also acknowledge that there is a risk in attempts to be self-reflexive that one results in merely centring the self and thereby ‘eclipsing and de-authorizing the articulations of others’ (Skeggs 2004a, p. 128). It would, however, be disingenuous not to state why I wish to pursue this research and how I arrived at this point.

The impetus to write this thesis stems from the personal and the political: my experiences as a woman in a culture that demands a slender body, and my position as a feminist which urges me to fight such oppressive structures. My first encounter with pro-ana online spaces was not as a researcher, but an interested user. I was in my twenties, entering another phase in my life where I would undergo extreme dieting and, to be blunt, I was intrigued. I pored over images of emaciated models – although in fairness I did not need to go to pro-ana sites to find them. I trawled through the ‘tips ‘n’ tricks’ on weight loss, noting that many of them I had tried already. Again, it was not so much the pro-ana sites that had guided me. From only eating soup, to diet pills procured from the Internet; from obsessive jogging, to laxatives and weight-loss tea – it was years of reading women’s magazines, of looking at other women, of lessons learned from growing up with three sisters, that taught me I would never be thin enough. To me, pro-ana online was an inevitable response to the way women are made to feel about their bodies. I was angry, but not in the least bit surprised.

My desire to be perfectly thin did not sit well with my identifying as a feminist, and for a long time, I struggled to reconcile the two. For instance, after being loudly told by a

(male) construction worker that I looked pregnant, I did not turn to feminism. Rather, I ignored it altogether and rigidly pursued a diet consisting only of an avocado and a tomato each day. Nonetheless, deep-down I knew that this obsession with the way I looked was not conducive to the way I understood gender relations. Even before I read Bordo I recognised this.

Kim Chernin says that

the changing awareness among women of our position in society has divided itself into two movements, one which is a movement towards feminine power, the other a retreat from it, supported by the fashion and diet industries, which share a fear of women's power. (1981, p.99)

Whilst this oversimplifies the current understandings of feminism, eliding the desire to be thin with patriarchal collusion, it nonetheless highlights that such a focus on physical appearance can be 'profoundly disempowering' (Bartky 1990, p.85; see also Wolf 1991, p.19). My entire focus was the number on the scales, and it consumed my every waking thought. There simply was not time for anything else, let alone feminist politics. As Nita McKinley puts it, 'working to achieve illusive ideal weight deprives women of self-esteem and keeps their energies directed toward personal change rather than political change' (1999, p.108; see also Hartley 2001, p.64). For me, at least, it was difficult to reconcile an obsession with eating less than 500 calories a day with my anger that, as a woman, I was constantly judged on physical appearance. But, for a long time, I simply carried on, and felt shame at every turn: shame that I was fat and unattractive, and shame that, as a feminist, I should have known better. I may have failed at femininity, but I was also failing at feminism.

I have not touched a diet for four years now and it is no small coincidence that during this four year period I have been writing this thesis. I am not daring to suggest that any person with body issues should undertake doctoral research in order to free themselves. That would be absurd and only result in the kind of self-centred research Skeggs (2004a) warns us against. However, in the process of working on this thesis I

have had the privilege of engaging with a range of feminist writers who have helped me understand that the thin ideal operates as a form of social control. Being able to do this on such an immersive level is an opportunity I have been afforded because of my middle-class position, a privilege denied to many. As such, throughout the process of this project, I have endeavoured to be self-reflexive and to recognise that not everybody will regard compulsory thinness through the lens of feminism.

This is not to say that I am now no longer susceptible to the images of slender perfection that seem to infiltrate every aspects of women's lives, that some academic armour now shields me from the desire to be thin. Absolutely not, and in the process of this research there were certainly times when I looked at the flat stomachs and thigh gaps and had a stab of yearning, however perverse that may sound. I know my experience of body hatred and confusion is not unique and my reason for sharing my personal experience is because it is indicative of 'the tense relationship that many feminists experience between the ideology of accepting our bodies as they are, the critique of normative body ideals and practices, and the desire for them' (Throsby and Gimlin 2010, p.114). In a society which values thinness, aligning it with health and self-worth whilst repudiating fat (Bordo 2003; Lupton 1996; Sobal and Maurer 1999), resisting body disciplining can be hard work and the ramifications far-reaching. This occurs to such a degree that in contemporary Western culture, 'the imperfect body has become the sign of an imperfect character' (Gimlin 2002, p.5). The thin ideal is about much more than body weight, and this study seeks to explicate that.

When I tell people about my research, they tend to respond in one of two ways, either with concern and sadness, or with disbelief: '*Pro-anorexia?*' they exclaim, checking they heard correctly. That anyone would actively pursue anorexia sounds preposterous to most people, but for the very same individuals, eating 'clean', going to the gym, dieting before a holiday, all seem perfectly reasonable. To be clear, I am not arguing that healthy-eating and exercise are the same as self-starvation and obsessive

workouts. Rather, I suggest that the everyday body discipliner and the pro-anorectic operate on a continuum and, as this thesis will show, they have increasingly little distance between them.

## **Chapter 1: Disciplining the female body: medicine, maladies, and *anorexia nervosa*.**

### **Introduction**

In order to understand the provenance of pro-ana online spaces, the first two chapters of this thesis are contextual. They seek to interrogate the disciplining of the female body within medicine and popular culture respectively. In this first chapter, I explore the history of the medical gaze, tracing the way in which the female body has been discursively produced by medicine. As I highlighted above in my review of pro-ana scholarship, the phenomenon has been examined at length in the health sciences and has, therefore, been framed as a medical issue. I argue that such understandings overlook the extent to which it is constituted by mainstream thinness culture.

Although, as this thesis will demonstrate, pro-ana online spaces are inextricably linked to the culture from which they emerge, part of this culture is, of course, medical. Pro-ana users present an affront to medical authority, either by appropriating it for their own ends, or by circumventing it entirely. This chapter serves to outline how medicine came to be an almighty force in Western culture and, in so doing, objectified and undermined women and their bodies. It therefore operates as a starting point for examining the extent to which the pro-ana phenomenon contains the potential to critique the thin ideal and its controlling gaze.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first explores the development of the medical gaze during the Enlightenment and the creation of thinness as a norm against which all bodies are measured. The second section interrogates how the medical gaze played a part in the subordination of women: their removal from the medical profession, and subsequent objectification. This leads to the third section where I explore the cultural construction of *anorexia nervosa*. I suggest that an understanding of the way in which anorexia has been utilised as a form of social control is symptomatic of the

governing of women's bodies in Western culture, as well as the ubiquity of disordered eating. In the final section, I interrogate the opportunities for resistance under the medical gaze.

### **The development of the medical gaze**

The modern medical gaze and the extent to which it became a form of control over individual bodies and society as a whole is considered by Michel Foucault in a number of his works (1967; 1973; 1976). In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) he describes the inception of modern medicine which occurred during the Enlightenment. This constituted a significant shift in medical knowledge and practice: it was a process whereby doctors were conceptualised, through a discourse of scientific objectivity and authority, as being the arbiters of bodily meaning. Further, it was during this process that the patient ceased to be actively involved their own medicalisation. Instead, as Foucault argues, 'the medical reading must take him [sic] into account only to place him in parentheses' (1973, p.7). This meant that the body of the patient came to be understood as separate from the patient's selfhood, a dehumanising process which rendered all individuals subservient to medical authority, regardless of gender.

As societal faith in an all-powerful God was waning, belief in the abilities of the almighty medical practitioner was growing. In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault notes that 'as positivism imposes itself upon medicine and psychiatry, this practice becomes more and more obscure, the psychiatrist's power more and more miraculous' (1967, p.275). The doctor was seen to possess special abilities, previously only attributed to God. A number of other scholars have explored the way in which medicine came to replace religion (Ehrenreich and English 1979; Hepworth, 1999; Turner 1996). Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English explain the success of science as a new form of religion: 'It was tough yet transcendent – hardheaded and masculine, yet at the same time able to "soar above" commercial reality' (1979, p.68). This modern form of

medicine was the epitome of rationality, and it was men who were charged with dispensing such rationality, as I explore in detail later.

However, the medical gaze did not remain solely focused on the individual, rather it sought to penetrate all aspects of society, 'growing in a complex, ever-proliferating way until it finally achiev[ed] the dimensions of a history, a geography, a state' (Foucault 1973, p.29). Ever-expanding, it therefore became a means of controlling the population. Foucault (1976) calls this manifestation of control on the micro and macro level, 'bio-power', suggesting that the rise of bio-power reflects the retreat from sovereign power. For Foucault, 'bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (1976, pp.140-141). Illness and morbidity had to be prevented in order to maintain a productive workforce. Moreover, as Julie Hepworth points out, 'this preventive focus later became instrumental in structuring a national health care system in England' (1999, p.21).

Bio-power establishes norms around which all persons are measured, and therein lies its potency. Thus, Foucault argues:

Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distribution around the norm. (1976, p.144)

Control over the population is therefore enacted through technologies of normalisation. Bodies come to be differentiated and managed by their proximity to or aberrance from the norm. Consequently, in the nineteenth century, bodies were regulated through the classification of those considered normal and those deemed abnormal; the norm was the primary concern, not health (Foucault 1973, p.40). Bio-power operates to regulate and police the population and as Martin Hewitt points out, 'the entrance of the human sciences into administration was not guided by humanitarianism but by the advent of



disciplinary technologies' (1983, p.243). As such, what is considered healthy and what is considered normal became interchangeable, a legacy which persists to this day.

For instance, in the present day, the Body Mass Index calculator (BMI) is used widely to determine whether or not an individual is of a healthy weight, when what it actually does is measure against a regulatory norm (Czerniawski 2007). The history of the BMI therefore warrants some discussion here. Amanda M. Czerniawski (2007) situates the provenance of the BMI calculator in the height and weight tables used by the life insurance industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These tables, which measured a person's height and weight in order to calculate an ideal, were used to ascertain the type of policy an individual would purchase based on their perceived health: the longer they lived, the more profit the industry could stand to make. The tables then brought about the notion of an ideal weight and they were used for social regulation, much like the BMI calculator is today. Czerniawski demonstrates how an ideal, and one for that matter which is linked to profit, has come to be seen as the norm and the healthy citizen is encouraged to make use of such technologies.

Technologies of normalisation are by no means limited to the regulation of body weight. Miah and Rich (2008, p.53) note that public health websites such as the NHS and BBC not only provide advice on disease prevention, they also feature lifestyle advice more broadly. The imperative to health therefore permeates every aspect of our lives and in many different guises. The *NHS Choices* website features a plethora of guidance on scales and devices which allow the individual to plot their health and well-being. This includes, for example, a section devoted to a range of online applications and gadgets which can be used to measure sugar or alcohol intake against recommended guidelines (NHS Choices 2017a). In a separate area of the website, the would-be healthy citizen is provided with advice on how to measure their pulse in order to assess their heart rate (ibid. 2017b), in another, information on how to read their blood pressure (ibid. 2017c). This includes a self-assessment form which generates results to

place the individual within a range from low, to normal, through to high blood pressure, with correlating colours, the latter being red to connote danger (ibid.). Importantly, all these featured tools and technologies have been organised into registers of normal and abnormal.

For Deborah Lupton, public health guidance 'is a form of pedagogy, which like other forms, serves to legitimize ideologies and social practices by making statements about how individuals should conduct their bodies' (1994, p.31). This means that the concept of 'health' can be deployed as a means of obscuring practices which are unhealthy, which, as I show in later chapters, pro-ana users enact in order to safeguard their spaces. Used in this way, health is reduced to discourse. As Foucault reminds us 'power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms' (1976, p.86). If the disciplinary practices in which we engage are recast as necessary for our own good, we are much more likely to enact them. Simon J. Williams therefore suggests that health is 'a contested notion and an elusive phenomenon' (2003, p.42). What it means to be healthy is increasingly ambiguous. This, in turn, renders it vulnerable to appropriation, whether by public health services, marketing companies or – as I explore later – creators of pro-ana online spaces.

Helen Malson argues that today, by rearticulating weight loss as a health issue, it is 'made to appear necessary, beneficial and hence seemingly above reproach' (2008, p.29). The impact that this has had on understandings of 'obesity'<sup>5</sup> is therefore extensive. Compulsory thinness and the avoidance of 'obesity' are often framed as moral obligations; scholars of Fat Studies have argued that if one is 'obese', one is understood to be a moral failure (Hartley 2001; Haworth-Hoepfner 1999; LeBesco 2004). This has led to a repudiation of the fat body in Western culture, which is both

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this thesis, following scholars of Fat Studies, I place 'obesity' – and its variations – in inverted commas to indicate that it is a contested and problematic term (see, for instance, Rothblum and Solovay 2009).

justified and encouraged. As Cecilia Hartley (2001, p.65) points out, 'fat-phobia is one of the few acceptable forms of prejudice left in a society that at times goes to extremes to prove itself politically correct'. 'Obesity' is widely seen as dangerous, as a health threat in need of prevention (Cogan 1999, p.231). If 'obesity' and fatness are conflated with illness (LeBesco 2004, p.30) then thinness has, albeit fallaciously, come to be understood as a marker of good health and good morals (Bordo 2003). In this current (Western) climate of plenty, only the most upstanding of individuals are able to achieve thinness. This, in turn, makes the quest ever more impossible.

The moral obligation to diet however is not a new phenomenon. Bryan S. Turner locates it within nineteenth century control of disease, whereby cleanliness of both the masses and the individual corresponded with one another:

The diseases of civilization were to be countered by personal salvation and clean water. The dietary management of the body was thus parallel to the management of water and sanitation in the environment, since both were aimed at moral control of impurity. (Turner 1982, p.165)

Cleanliness and dietary management are both concerned with 'policing the boundaries of the body, by maintaining strict control over what enters and what leaves the body's orifices' (Lupton 1994, p.32). As I discuss in chapter four, thinness and cleanliness are associated with one another to this today and play out in both pro-ana online spaces and mainstream guidance around healthy-eating alike.

Although self-regulating the body through diet may sound Foucauldian, Turner points out that in his examination of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, Foucault overlooks the science of diet and its relationship to capitalism (Turner 1992). That is, diet itself became a means of producing healthy bodies that are useful for capitalism. Turner argues that the provenance of the dietary regime lies in the work of eighteenth century physician to the elite, George Cheyne. Cheyne advised overweight upper-class individuals on how to control their weight through careful eating and exercise, practices which then became popularised across all strata of society. As such, 'the dietary

practices of the eighteenth century professional classes gradually percolated through the social system to embrace all social groups in a framework of organized eating, drinking and physical training' (Turner 1992, p.192). What began as a specific lifestyle for the overweight elite became an aspiration for all.

It is not difficult to see how such a regime might not benefit, or even be possible, for the working classes. This was not a lifestyle for the poor, but for 'people who could afford to eat, ride horses and enjoy the luxury of a regular vomit' (Turner 1992, p.190). However, possession of a slim body was not simply a means of distancing oneself from the working classes, rather, as Bordo points out, 'the gracefully slender body announced aristocratic status; disdainful of the bourgeois need to display wealth and power ostentatiously' (2003, p.191). Thinness, as it is today, was a way of indicating one's refinement, but only the refined had the resources to achieve it. Consequently, the thin *cum* healthy body is not accessible to everyone. It is located at the intersection of a number of privileges, as chapter four's critical enquiries demonstrate.

More widely, the political economy of medicine can be said to maintain a number of systemic inequalities. According to Foucault this stems from what he calls 'the great confinement' during the classical age where those believed to be disruptive to order, 'the unemployed, the idle, and vagabonds', were very literally incarcerated (1967, p.50). The poor and disenfranchised were alternately confined and deployed to contribute to the economy: 'cheap manpower in the periods of full employment and high salaries; and in periods of unemployment, reabsorption of the idle and social protection against agitation and uprisings' (Foucault 1967, p.51). This meant that even those who departed from socially-acceptable norms were rendered useful during this time. Although the notion of confinement does not operate so literally today, there are still many instances in which medicine is deployed to increase an individual's capabilities and thus render them useful under late-capitalism. Using examples such as prescribed meditation or anti-depressants to distract patients from socio-economic

factors which may impede them, Lupton argues that 'in their relative dominance over patients, doctors are empowered to make statements that reinforce dominant capitalist ideologies by directing patients' behaviour into non-threatening channels' (1994, p.108). In this way, medicine colludes with capitalism to shore up the status quo by (at times literally) anaesthetising its subjects.

As I have explored thus far, the medical gaze operates as a form of social control on both the individual and societal level. Through bio-power, we become self-regulating, self-disciplining citizens. Our quest may be one which aims for good health, but health, as we have seen, is often deployed to obscure practices which uphold the status quo. Nowhere is this more prominent than in the treatment of women by medical authority.

### **The medical gaze and women**

Foucault's account of the birth of modern medicine, whilst useful to this study, neglects to address the position of women. In order to make way for medical authority as we now know it, women were effectively ousted from the profession and rendered passive objects of a gaze which would ensure their subordination for centuries to come (Ehrenreich and English 1979). Their ejection from medicine constitutes a crucial moment in the subordination of women and deserves sustained discussion. Thus, the remainder of this chapter, whilst drawing upon a Foucauldian framework, focuses largely on the side-lined history of women and medicine. As I have shown, medical discourse impels individuals to engage in regulatory practices which it legitimates under the umbrella of science, a form of 'objective' authoritative knowledge. But the development of this knowledge, together with the process by which it became legitimated, was by no means neutral; rather as I will now explore, it was masculine.

Ehrenreich and English's (1979) account of women's expulsion from the medical profession exposes the way in which women's mutual support networks were effectively destroyed during this process of medical legitimation. This rendered women

isolated from one other and dependent upon those same men who had banished them. The removal of the female midwife is cited as a pinnacle moment in cementing women's subordinate status in medicine:

With the elimination of midwifery, all women – not just those of the upper class – fell under the biological hegemony of the medical profession. In the same stroke women lost their last autonomous role as healers. The only roles left for women in the medical system were as employees, customers, or “material”. (Ehrenreich and English 1979, p.88)

With women confined to the margins, men's status as experts was confirmed, and it was middle-class men who were said to possess the expertise to transform conventional medicine into 'scientific' medicine (Ehrenreich and English 1979, p.70). As a result, the medical profession became, as it remains, primarily the reserve of the middle-class, white patriarch.

Because women were seen to 'occupy the world of private emotion and affections, whereas men are allocated to social roles emphasizing reason, instrumentality, and public responsibility' (Turner 1995, p.95), science did not look kindly on them. As a result, 'the very notion of the dispassionate scientist, whose mind transcended his body, defined science as a male pursuit. The object of scientific knowledge – that is nature – was female' (Hesse-Biber 1996, p.19). If women were too weak and lacking in reason to be doctors, then they were perfectly positioned to be patients (Ehrenreich and English 1979, p.92; see also Turner 1995, pp.102-103). This subjugation of women as patients thus served a dual purpose. Western culture has long framed the female body in binaries: 'beautiful but unclean, alluring, but dangerous [...] mysterious, duplicitous – a source of pleasure and nurturance, but also of destruction and evil' (Suleiman 1986, p.1), therefore, by rendering women patients, male doctors were able to exert control over that which they were hitherto unable to understand.

This has led scholars to describe the male scientific triumph over the female body in terms of colonisation (McGrath 2002, p.30; Turner 1995, p.28). As Roberta McGrath

(2002, p.30) suggests, 'maps and women's bodies both harboured and advanced fantasies and projections of future invasion'. Moreover, that this female 'invasion' occurred at the height of the European empires' projects of colonisation suggests a particular nervousness amid the otherwise secure patriarchy surrounding that which they did not know, or could not understand, both in the wider world and in the domestic sphere. Sander L. Gilman (1985) explores the way in which apparent discoveries around female sexuality and racial difference both paralleled and informed one another. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's notion of adult female sexuality as 'the "dark continent" of psychology' (Gilman 1985, p.238), as an unknown quantity, Gilman argues thus:

It is Freud's intent to explore this hidden "dark continent" and reveal the hidden truths about female sexuality, just as the anthropologist – explorers (such as Lombroso) were revealing the hidden truths about the nature of the black. Freud continues a discourse which relates the images of male discovery to the images of the female as object of discovery. (Ibid.)

It is instructive that the repression of women via medicine should occur at the backdrop of the nineteenth century *fin de siècle*. At a time when the New Woman was emerging, medicine was seeking to reinstate her in a traditional, unthreatening role via its deployment of Foucault's 'normalizing gaze' (Hesse-Biber 1991, p.176). Creating an anatomy of the female body meant the patriarchy could contain that which it saw as a threat to its authority.

The notion of men's fear of femininity has been explored at length in the field of psychoanalysis. Freud describes it in terms of man's fear of infection by the woman:

Perhaps this dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man, forever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile. The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and of then showing himself incapable. (Freud [1918] 1991, p.271)

For Freud, man's fear of woman is a projection outwards of the fear of his own inadequacies. Put differently, if men can control women, they can ensure their dominance. Women must be cast as pathological, so there is a need for them to be

controlled. As such, Mary Ann Doane aligns representations of women with those of disease: 'they are both socially devalued or undesirable, marginalized elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity' (1985, p.152). Nowhere is this elision of femininity and disease more pronounced than in the nineteenth century hystericisation of the female body.

Foucault describes such hystericisation as 'a threefold process whereby the female body was analyzed – qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practice' (1976, p.104). By diagnosing women as hysterical, and therefore irrational, the patriarchy was able to reign with the backing of science. It was no coincidence, then, that as women demanded greater freedoms, patriarchal institutions sought to undermine them, bolstered as they were by science and the academy (Sayers 1982 cited in Hepworth 1999, p.37). Hysteria can therefore be read as a patriarchal construct deployed in order to stymie women's emancipation – and for that matter physical movement – by quite literally sending them to their sickbeds. It would become the answer to everything, leading Foucault to remark:

[Seventeenth-century anatomist Thomas Willis] merely says, and in an explicit way, that the idea of hysteria is a catchall for the fantasies, not of the person who is or believes himself ill, but of the ignorant doctor who pretends to know why. (1967, p.138)

Medicine was dominated by male practitioners who claimed more knowledge of women's bodies than women themselves, knowledge which ironically, contained more than a degree of fantasy (McGrath 2002, p.30). This meant that women, having been denied any position of authority in the medical profession, were now being alienated from their own bodies.



## **Female maladies and feminine norms**

The medicalisation of the female body in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries operated to reinforce and even idealise oppressive gender roles. For instance, during the Victorian period, agoraphobia, an illness which literally kept women indoors, was as common a diagnosis as hysteria. It became 'expressive of Victorian morality in which the good woman was a woman within a household' (Turner 1995, p.106). In what seems a bizarre twist, the sick, house-bound female was reconstructed as aspirational, and not only for the middle-classes (Bordo 2003; Ehrenreich and English 1979; Michie 1987; Turner 1995). Put differently, to be ill, was to be ideally feminine. Bordo takes the correlation between illness and femininity further than this suggesting that we might view female maladies as exposing the requirements of normative femininity. She says:

In hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, the woman's body may thus be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. (Bordo 1989, p.20)

Ironically, the nineteenth century medical gaze, which operated to shed light upon darkness and uncover the secrets of the body, in practice shrouded it in further mystery. As a result, analysis of these so-called female illnesses reveals more about the construction of gender than it does about the anatomy of the body.

Bordo (1989) argues that female disorders and 'normal' female practices operate on a continuum. In later work, she suggests that 'the psychopathologies that develop within a culture' are 'the crystallization of much that is wrong with it' (Bordo 2003, p.141). Through a close examination of these female practices, the blurred boundaries between those which are considered pathological and those which are considered normative are illuminated. However, in order that the status quo is maintained a transformation must take place in which 'conditions that are "objectively" (and on one level, experientially) constraining, enslaving, and even murderous, come to be experienced as liberating, transforming, and life-giving' (Bordo 1989, p.15). At the

same time, signifiers of health are redefined as illness in order to maintain social control and generate profit for the beauty industry. This is explored at length by Naomi Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth*. Like Bordo et al, Wolf draws comparisons between modern day 'disorders' and those of the nineteenth century, to suggest that 'both the Victorian and the modern medical systems reclassify aspects of healthy femaleness into grotesque abnormality' (Wolf 1991, p.22). It seems that latter-day notions of health rely on a distorted logic of opposites. In summary, by medicalising beauty and beautifying medicine, social control over the female body becomes a comprehensive discourse with the power to oppress women from all angles.

Nonetheless, the medical and beauty industries carefully erase their involvement in such oppressive activities. Using the example of breast implants and the controversies surrounding them, Germaine Greer describes a pattern of manipulation in which women are presented as 'both the perpetrators and the victims' (2000, p.38). She explains how doctors are said to relent to women's requests for cosmetic alteration, and then, because of media sensationalising around the dangers of implants, the same women demand they are removed. This narrative is exemplary of the way various powers unite to construct, then profit from, the insecurities of women under the guise of service and support.

However, this is not to say that women blindly acquiesce to such procedures. Kathy Davis argues that women should not be seen as passive victims of cosmetic surgery since 'it can paradoxically provide an avenue toward becoming an embodied subject, rather than objectified body' (1995, p.114). Although, I concede that, in certain situations, 'for a woman whose suffering has gone beyond a certain point, cosmetic surgery can be a matter of justice – the only fair thing to do' (Davis 1995, p.163), to frame it as a feminist struggle is problematic when it invariably reinforces the structures feminism works to critique (cf. Bordo 2003, pp.31-32). Meredith Jones' (2008) analysis of cosmetic surgery provides an alternative to the active/passive binary so often used

to describe feminine beauty practices. She argues that cosmetic surgery is ‘too complicated a practice to be analysed in terms of agency or victimhood’ (Jones 2008, p.16). Anorexia and, to an extent, pro-anorexia have been subject to juxtaposing evaluations which position them as either protest against or compliance with patriarchal structures, or both. However, in line with Jones, I suggest that approaching practices in such a way oversimplifies them. I attend to this in detail in chapter five of the thesis, but next, I explore the history of anorexia in relation to the medical gaze.

### **Anorexia and the medical gaze**

The purported ‘discovery’ of *anorexia nervosa* is illuminating in the study of the medical gaze, for it not only provides insight into nineteenth century medicine, but also women’s present day estrangement from their bodies. Hepworth suggests that the construction of anorexia operated to reinforce women’s inferior status (1999, p.27). She argues that ‘the early influence of this early classification has continued through to the late twentieth century and the categorization of *anorexia nervosa* within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – IV Revised (DSM-R)*’ (1999, p.2). Published by the American Psychiatric Association, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is a reference guide used to diagnose mental disorders. Since Hepworth was writing, *DSM- 5* has been published and *anorexia nervosa* remains a listed mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association 2013, pp. 338-345).

Although there is some discrepancy around the exact date, it is generally agreed that *anorexia nervosa* became a medical category in 1873, when eminent English physician Sir William Withey Gull, and synchronously in France, neurologist Dr Charles Lasègue assigned it as such (Brumberg 1989; Hepworth 1999; Heywood 1996). For these physicians, such a finding was a coup. As Hepworth wryly notes ‘Drs W.W. Gull and E.C. Lasèque [sic] have been credited, and have credited themselves, with the ‘discovery’ of *anorexia nervosa*’ (Hepworth 1999, p.27). Gull himself was

insistent that he had discovered anorexia independently of Lasègue and that this should be known (*ibid.*, pp.30-31). The two men's diagnoses of anorexia did however differ. Gull's rested heavily upon a biomedical account of anorexia at the expense of psychological and cultural influences (Gremillion 1992; Hepworth 1999; O'Connor 1995). Lasègue, by contrast, focussed more on the psychological aspects of anorexia (Brumberg 1989, p.199). Nonetheless, both doctors ultimately situated women's inherent irrationality as a key explanation for anorexia (Hepworth 1999, p.29). It appears that the foundations upon which anorexia are built are decidedly shaky: if resting upon erroneous notions of female unreason was not enough, the term *anorexia nervosa* itself is also misleading.

The word anorexia derives from the Greek, '*an-* without + *orexis-* appetite' (Collins 2011, p.36), literally translating to 'without appetite'. However, as Rudolph M. Bell points out, "anorexia nervosa" (aversion to food due to some personality disorder) is something of a misnomer. Many of those who suffer from the disease do not report a "loss of appetite," although obviously they do not eat enough to be healthy' (1985, pp.1-2). As authors of anorexia memoirs attest, it is not that anorectics do not have an appetite, but that they work obsessively to curb it (see, for example, Bowman 2007; Hornbacher 1999; Liu [1979] 2000). If this was not misleading enough, the suffix *nervosa* suggests that this lack of appetite is the consequence of a nervous disease, which Hepworth argues 'served to pathologise the condition, and reinforce the use of medical scientific and clinical discourses in its documentation and management' (1999, p.32).<sup>6</sup>

The historical understanding of *anorexia nervosa* is riddled with inaccuracies. Physicians in their immense authority were misled by the superficial signs of anorexia

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the suffix '*nervosa*' was favoured by Gull for its gender neutrality (Lasègue had wanted it to be known as '*l'anorexie hystérique*' or hysterical anorexia, thus an illness which could only affect women), if it were a malady of the nervous system however, anorexia could affect anyone regardless of gender, as Gull's had research shown (Brumberg 1989).

and treatment centred upon returning the body to what they conceived as its proper visual representation of femininity via controlled feeding (O'Connor 1995, p.543).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the 'cure' for anorexia was visual and one whereby health and gender identity were conflated: as long as a woman *appeared* as she should, then all was ostensibly well. This is clearly problematic and Rich (2006) argues that the focus on visual signs of anorexia contributes to its stigma and risks discounting those who are struggling with anorexia because they appear to be a 'normal weight' (p.290).

Megan Warin (2004) explores the privileging of the visual in her account of the media reception of her ethnography of anorexia: journalists insisted on accompanying her research with images of emaciated bodies, in spite of her refusal that her work, and for that matter her research subjects, should be presented in this way. She argues that visual media representations of anorexia reduce it to a primitivism which 'others' the anorectic (Warin 2004, p.100). Present day anorectics are thus deemed spectacles much as they were in the nineteenth century: their bodies are not only reduced to their surface value, they are rendered objects of intrigue and even awe. Helen Gremillion who argues that modern psychiatry, rather than providing a cure, actually informs and perpetuates anorexia states that, 'anorexia cannot be 'cured' in the traditional sense because it not only *embodies* the status quo, but also calls it into question' (1992, p.58). Gremillion's thesis expresses the inherent paradox of anorexia, as a state which both conforms to and disrupts hegemonic gender identity. The desire to be thin and in control of bodily impulses is so deeply enmeshed in Western culture, that if anorexia is to be 'cured', then the culture in which it is situated must be treated also.

However, medical discourse displaces and erases cultural explanations, constructing women as variously at-risk, or as harbingers of disease and ill-health. They are portrayed as prone to developing eating disorders, but also as having the power to

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<sup>7</sup> Erin O'Connor argues that the provenance of this visual bias towards anorexia diagnoses lies in Gull's 1873 talk on anorexia to the Clinical Society of London during which he showed photographs of anorexic patients before and after treatment (1995, p.536).

spread them. Consequently, Burke (2006) argues that anorexia is presented by mainstream culture as 'contagion' between women rather than having any cultural cause. Yet, contradictorily, this tacitly imbues the anorectic with the power 'to move vulnerable, female spectators to imitation' (Ferreday 2012, p.143). Women are therefore framed as simultaneously vulnerable and threatening, as the media articles in the introduction to this thesis showed. They are constructed in such a way that they require protection from themselves. This has the effect of exonerating not only medical discourse, but the media and beauty industry, of any blame for the culture of thinness. As Sharlene Hesse-Biber argues, by treating women's eating and weight problems as a disease, the responsibility is placed upon the individual, any societal influence is elided and a recovery market is generated (1996). As a result, the industries collude to exert control over women, whilst at the same time absolving themselves of any blame through the adoption of a logic which situates the individual as maker of their own destiny (see Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). It is within this logic that deep contradictions occur, those which I suggest materialise in anorexia.

### **Resisting the medical gaze**

Foucault famously argued that '[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1976, p.95). There are always opportunities to resist power but, because we are constituted by power, it is not possible to step outside of it. For instance, Ehrenreich and English (1979, p.123) suggest that some women in the nineteenth century used the 'sick role' to avoid their domestic obligations: if they were ill, they could not become pregnant or do housework. Hence, even within oppressive roles, women found ways to resist. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the women who were inserted into the sick role during this time were not poor or working class, but wealthy (Ehrenreich and English 1979, p.104). Such women therefore possessed the resources to use the role to their advantage.

By the same token, Lupton (1994) points out that those who defy medical authority are invariably the privileged and educated, whereas those of lower socio-economic status may feel too intimidated to do so. Anorexia has long been hailed as an illness of the high-achieving middle-class female (chapter four explores this in detail), which positions the anorectic as a likely candidate to resist medical authority. Gremillion notes that many anorectics are 'amateur theorists' of their 'illness' (1992, p.59): they have the resources and access to knowledge which enables them, to an extent, to challenge doctors' advice, even if this may ultimately be to their detriment. Such expertise is evidenced in anorexia memoirs, with authors including Marya Hornbacher (1999) and Grace Bowman (2007) recalling that their entire identity rested upon their academic excellence and an extraordinary ability to self-starve. By drawing on reservoirs of patriarchal knowledge, anorectics are able to appropriate medical thought and carve out opportunities for resistance.

Foucault argues that 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (1976, p.101). Within the power of medical discourse there is the potential to resist it. As such, the creation of pro-ana online spaces and their utilisation of medical discourse is an example of what Foucault calls 'reverse' discourse:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphroditism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (1976, p.101)

Although the plight of the pro-anorectic and the homosexual are very different, I argue that their use of reverse discourse is similar: both convert what has been labelled a pathological category into an identity. Having been interpellated as anorexic, those who engage with pro-ana culture are using the very language of their diagnosis as a means

of resistance and empowerment. Their claims to being *pro-anorexic* constitute their demands to legitimacy and call into question the authority of medicine, all the while altering the meanings of the language they appropriate. Jack Halberstam points out that a 'reverse discourse is in no way the "same" as the discourse it reverses; indeed, its desire for a reversal is a desire for transformation' (2005, p.53). The extent to which pro-ana online spaces transform discourse is a question I pose throughout this thesis, for, as Foucault (1976) warns us, power is both mobile and productive in nature, and consequently it cannot be claimed.

In spite of this, the Internet has provided numerous opportunities for resistance to medical authority, through for instance, knowledge acquisition which can help patients to feel more empowered. This has led Miah and Rich to liken the medicalisation of cyberspace to 'a novel medical discovery – not quite a cure for cancer, but in this trope, an artefact on to which profound expectations and imaginations are placed' (2008, p.8). The Internet, and the endless possibilities it is assumed to provide for the patient, can therefore be likened to the miraculous expectations endowed upon the doctors of old, albeit expectations that could not necessarily be fulfilled. Even so, it can enable an individual to better understand and manage their illness, often resulting in what has been termed the 'expert patient' (Department of Health 1999, 2001 cited in Fox, Ward and O'Rourke 2005, p.965) .

Nick Fox, Katie Ward and Alan O'Rourke (2005) argue that the expert patient pervades pro-ana online spaces: she may be anti-recovery and subvert the medical model of anorexia, but pro-ana online provides her with valuable coping tools and in fact suggests that anorexia is not a condition from which one simply recovers. Furthermore, Mebbie Bell locates pro-ana as a direct affront to the medical gaze whereby these spaces "teach" individuals how to perform a "normal" body in order to evade the regulatory authority invested in the medical gaze' (2009, p.152). At the same time, online spaces can provide a voice for those who feel they are unable to speak openly



about their illness, as Miah and Rich point out, 'digital environments have provided alternative spaces in which women can construct stories that are not based on a "restitution narrative", but which instead focus on the disordered, painful and repressed feelings and experiences of illness' (2008, p.62).

Pro-ana online spaces are arguably controversial precisely because they demonstrate an irreverent attitude towards medical authority whilst also using the tools of that very same authority. As such, they offer possibilities to expose the requirements of ideal thinness and critique contemporary understandings of anorexia. In spite of this, it is important to note, as Bordo does, that 'the exposure of such mystifications, which should not be impeded by too facile a celebration of resistance, must remain central to a feminist politics of the body' (1993, p.199). Ultimately, pro-ana online spaces are shaped by the medical gaze they disrupt and they are constituted by the media images they appropriate. A key task for this thesis is to interrogate how these powers operate.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the way in which the medical gaze operates within Western culture, the impact this has had upon women, and as a result, understandings of eating disorders. Through my review of the key literature, I have shown how the penetrating medical gaze operates as a form of social control. By obfuscating ideologies of body-management as personal responsibility and moral obligation, the population becomes self-regulatory. This entails submission to disciplinary regimes which designate certain bodies as a norm against which all others are measured. Moreover, it positions the patient as a passive object of this normalising gaze, in that they acquiesce to the authority of superior knowledge. The effect of this hierarchy of knowledge is one whereby the 'patient' is distanced from their own body, making it further susceptible to colonisation by the medical practitioner. Having been ejected from the medical profession and made objects of scientific study, women are particularly vulnerable to

the medical gaze. I argue that these developments anticipate eating disordered culture in so far as the medical gaze privileges the disciplining of the body and its subsequent alienation, both of which occur *in extremis* in eating disorders. In short, if the female disorders of the nineteenth century expose the constructs of Victorian womanhood, then pro-anorexia is an alarming comment on contemporary femininity.

I suggest that the practices endorsed by the medical gaze and those of [pro-]eating disordered persons are on a continuum, one whereby the two repeatedly reference one another, albeit not always wittingly. What is more, the struggle for anorectics to fully overcome their eating disorder is hampered by Western cultural preferences for slenderness and control, in other words, recovery seems to be at odds with what is culturally valuable. I will explore this further in the next chapter where I interrogate how thinness operates in popular culture, specifically women's magazines. I suggest that these texts, like medical discourse, hold body-disciplining in high regard, the sum of which makes a culture of disordered-eating almost inevitable.

## Chapter 2: Disciplining the female body: contemporary UK women's magazines

'Lose weight without dieting: [...] putting ice-cubes in your drink forces your body to heat itself up, burning calories [...] If you get a food craving, chew gum or clean your teeth instead'.

(Cosmopolitan 2010, p.195)

'Pro Ana tips and tricks: Brush your teeth, chew zero-calorie gum or peppermint. Instead of bingeing, eat crushed ice'.

(*Pro-ana for Me* 2013)

### Introduction

In the previous context chapter I explored how medicine turned the female body into an object of intense scrutiny and a site of investigation and measurement. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which women have been invited to undertake this scrutiny themselves. Central to this is the concept of postfeminism and the neoliberal landscape that provides the context for this new way of relating to women's bodies.

This chapter identifies the ways in which women are invited to police the female body – whether their own or the bodies of others. Drawing upon a set of ubiquitous cultural texts – women's lifestyle magazines – I examine how women are taught to evaluate, measure, regulate, and castigate female bodies. Understanding this call to become a self-surveilling subject is imperative if we are to appreciate the motivations behind pro-ana online spaces, the discourses employed by pro-ana enthusiasts, and the processes of cultural appropriation that pro-ana users engage in when constructing their digital spaces and maintaining their online identities.

As the two quotations at the head of this chapter illustrate, my analysis also reveals the porosity of cultural boundaries that exist between 'acceptable' and 'pathological' engagements with the female body. Whilst the former quotation is from a women's lifestyle magazine, supported by advertising and available in all good newsagents, the latter is from an amateur online space, a site of controversy and the subject of moral panic for promoting eating disorders. What *Cosmopolitan* describes as a means of

losing weight without dieting is classified by *Pro-ana for Me* as one way of maintaining anorexia. Although the content of the advice is virtually identical, its presentation could not be more different: *Cosmopolitan* denies that its recommendations are about dieting, whereas *Pro-ana for Me* frames the same advice as self-starvation. Taking this blurred boundary as a starting point, this chapter reveals how the mainstream media operates under a guise of friendliness and support whilst masking a disciplinary and individualising gaze.

This chapter, and moreover, this thesis, is underpinned by a postfeminist neoliberal understanding of the female body. In line with Rosalind Gill, I suggest that postfeminism 'is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas' (2007a, p.164). The simplest way to demonstrate how this postfeminist neoliberal voice speaks to women is through analysing a set of mainstream texts before attending to the ostensibly marginal texts that constitute pro-ana online in the next chapter. The purpose of this chapter then, is twofold: to offer a critical discussion of the female body in the contemporary UK women's magazine and, to demonstrate how postfeminism operates in practice. Through analysis of these everyday texts, I identify the key themes which pervade postfeminist culture, exploring how it manufactures and perpetuates an understanding of femininity which is shaped by feminism, yet also undermines it.

## **Feminism**

One cannot understand postfeminism without first having an appreciation of feminism. An in-depth history of feminism is beyond the scope of this study, however, I would like to briefly address some key points before moving on to a discussion of the key thinkers in postfeminism. Defining feminism is a complex and elusive task; it cannot be summed up in a sentence and it is certainly not a monolith. For the purpose of this thesis

though, it is useful to think of feminism, as many scholars do, in waves.<sup>8</sup> These waves are by no means exhaustive, but operate as a tool for situating the current tendency towards postfeminism within the wider context of feminism.

The first wave of feminism is broadly defined by the work of early liberal feminist Mary Wollstonecraft who 'described the average women as totally subordinate and dehumanized by social constraints and lack of education' (Deckard 1983, p.207). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft calls for women to be given the same social and educational rights as men ([1792]1993). Her critique is echoed in the work of Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, who, during the late nineteenth century, lambasted women's 'retarded state of development' (Donovan 1985, p.45). Perkins-Gilman's commentary on the state of womanhood arguably anticipates second-wave liberal feminist Betty Friedan's (1963) contention that women were being progressively dehumanised in their roles as housewives. She even, controversially, used the extended analogy of Nazi concentration camps, asserting that 'the comfortable concentration camp that American women have walked into, or have been talked into by others, is [...] a frame of reference that denies woman's adult human identity' (1963, p.308).

The work of the first wave of feminism therefore continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most notably was the suffrage movement which secured women's right to vote (see Deckard 1983, pp.271-281). However, it is second wave feminism, which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, that is most pertinent to an understanding of postfeminism. It can be divided into two trajectories: radical feminism<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorensen (2006) for detailed analysis on the three waves of feminism.

<sup>9</sup> For key writings within radical second-wave feminism, I direct the reader to Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1977).

and liberal feminism.<sup>10</sup> Radical feminism sought to revise the structures which brought about oppression and, as Alice Echols surmises:

Radical feminists articulated the earliest and most provocative critiques of the family, marriage, love, normative heterosexuality, and rape. They fought for safe, effective, accessible contraception; the repeal of abortion laws; the creation of high quality, community-controlled childcare centers; and an end to the media's objectification of women. They also developed consciousness-raising – the movement's most effective organizing tool. (1989, pp.3-4)

In short, radical feminism demanded total structural change. On the contrary, liberal feminism, as Chris Beasley puts it, is 'the "moderate" or "mainstream" face of feminism' (1999, p.51). Concerned with legislative reform and women's participation in mainstream political and economic life, liberal feminism adumbrates the individualism of neoliberal feminism we see today (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006, p.11).

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, third-wave feminism emerged.<sup>11</sup> The third-wave has a deconstructionist agenda 'motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honor contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking' (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006, p.16). Proponents include Rebecca Walker who coined the term 'third-wave' and advocated for an activist approach to feminism, rather than a theoretical stance (Genz and Brabon 2009). More theoretical in her approach is third-wave feminist and queer theorist, Judith Butler (1990; 1993). Butler, for instance, draws our attention to the performativity of gender, suggesting that 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core' (1990, p.173). Although the third-wave is radical in its ideas, Tram Nguyen argues that '[it] is troubled by divisions within its still-forming body of activism and theories, as well as by postfeminist seductions' (2013, p.157). Third-wave feminism, like postfeminism, is characterised by contradictions and individualism.

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<sup>10</sup> Liberal feminism can be understood with reference to the afore-mentioned Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*.

<sup>11</sup> For key writings on third-wave feminism, I direct the reader to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards' *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000), and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's edited collection, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997).

More recently, scholars have begun to explore the possibility of a fourth-wave of feminism, one they suggest is borne out of Internet-based feminist activism (Munro 2013; Retallack, Ringrose, and Lawrence 2016). For Hannah Retallack, Jessica Ringrose and Emilie Lawrence (2016), the fourth-wave presents a direct affront to postfeminism. Whilst there is undoubtedly important feminist work happening both online and offline, my critical enquiries suggest that postfeminism is far from over. Therefore, in line with Gill (2016), I advocate for the 'value and utility of a continued attention to postfeminism' (p.625). It is to postfeminism that I now turn.

### **Postfeminism, neoliberalism, and the self-governing individual**

Angela McRobbie defines this new 'feminist' culture as one which 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved' (2004, p.255). For McRobbie, postfeminism is not simply a backlash against feminism, rather it 'comprises the coexistence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [...] with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity' (2009, p.12). Postfeminism incorporates elements of feminism so as to pre-empt a need for its politics: it tells women they have the choice to be whoever they want to be, provided they comply with hegemonic norms. It is, therefore, a particularly pernicious response to feminism which makes full use of its achievements to suggest that it is 'no longer needed, it is a spent force' (McRobbie 2004, p.255).

Postfeminism is characterized by contradictions (Tasker and Negra 2007, p.8), where for instance, 'choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the "wrong" "choices"' (Gill 2007a, p.163). If feminism seeks to endow women with autonomy and free choice, then postfeminism seeks to ensure they are making the 'right' kind of choices. The right choices are those which have been sanctified by normative femininity, meaning that 'women's relationship to the "choosing subject" is the product of social processes and

conditioning which are not of their own choosing' (Budgeon 2015, p.308). Ironically then, for all its claims to choice, postfeminist culture imposes restrictions upon which choices can be made and by whom.

As Skeggs points out, the production of the self is classed, and 'the working class are not allowed access to the resources and technologies required for self-production. This is why self-making is class-making' (2004b, p.91). As a result, the ideal postfeminist subject is 'white, straight, able-bodied and middle class' (Winch 2013, p.3; see also Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008), thus leaving little space for those who do not occupy such intersections of privilege. A disregard for social inequalities and a failure to engage with intersectionality means that this new feminist culture lacks 'emancipatory potential' (Scharff 2011, p.274). Postfeminism is exemplary of the way in which a political movement, in this case feminism, is co-opted by the very forces it set out to critique. Unlike feminism, which views solidarity and collective action as key to social change, for postfeminism, 'the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation' (Gill 2016, p.617).

It is because of postfeminism's focus on the self, as well as its contradictory and depoliticising qualities, that scholars such as Gill (2007a) and Christina Scharff (2012) have argued of its striking similarities with neoliberalism (see also Gill and Scharff, 2011, p.7). I understand neoliberalism as a discourse which operates to render bodies as productive as possible and to extract from them the maximum surplus value, whilst reducing their capacity for resistance. I discuss neoliberalism not as an economic position, but from a cultural perspective. At the same time, I describe it in the rhetoric of economics, because, as David Harvey surmises, 'neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything' (2005, p.33).

Wendy Brown (2005) agrees that although it began as a set of economic policies based on free trade, deregulation and minimum state intervention, neoliberalism has



now become a political project that has permeated our very selfhood. She argues that it 'figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for "self-care"—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions' (Brown 2005, p.42). For Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine, individuals within neoliberalism are 'agents of their own success [...] totally responsible for their own destiny' (2008, pp.227-228). In practice, this means that those who fail to correctly self-manage have only themselves to blame.

Although Nancy Fraser does not address postfeminism in name, her account of the way in which second-wave feminism and neoliberalism 'prospered in tandem' (2013, p.218) goes some way towards explaining the current postfeminist climate. She calls for feminism to realign with Left-wing politics, suggesting that whilst as a movement it may have grown enormously, it is now 'susceptible to serving the legitimisation needs of a new form of capitalism' (Fraser 2013, 223). For Fraser, feminism has been directly co-opted by neoliberalism and is playing into the status quo (see also Rottenberg 2014, p. 433). Ultimately, postfeminism and neoliberalism operate insidiously, to gloss over the glaring inequalities they perpetuate.

The postfeminist subject draws upon the language of feminism to assert that she is an autonomous being motivated by personal choice whilst simultaneously espousing compulsory heterosexuality, whiteness, and the primacy of the youthful, slender body. She perpetuates the understanding that mutual self-surveillance is fundamental to realising successful femininity, and furthermore that it is a form of pleasure. She pervades the contemporary UK women's magazine in the form of a false friend, an anonymous being who haunts the texts promising to tell all. The false friend's gossip and revelations are deployed to caution the reader against transgression of strict hierarchies through example. Operating through an economy of seeming trust, she knows celebrities best, she is the reader's friend and she will stop short of nothing to provide answers to questions you did not know you needed to ask. It is little wonder

then that these discourses of self-scrutiny dominate pro-ana online spaces when they are legitimised and endorsed by the mainstream media. Consequently, this chapter critically examines the postfeminist texts in which pro-ana culture finds its precedent.

## Methodology

The magazines selected for analysis in this study focus profoundly on the female body. As well as featuring detailed diet tips and exercise plans, they abound with images of celebrities whose bodies are to be applauded, and cautionary tales of those whose bodies are not. This content is strikingly similar to the pro-ana online spaces I discuss in later chapters. My definition of what constitutes the contemporary UK women's magazine is broad so as to examine a range of texts.<sup>12</sup> I have therefore undertaken research across a selection of lifestyle and celebrity gossip magazines, all of which primarily target women.

At the same time, this chapter does discriminate between magazines on the basis of cost, and rather than the costly high-fashion magazines such as *Elle* and *Vogue*, the focus of this research is on the cheaper, more accessible magazines targeting what they take to be the average woman. The cheapness and disposability of such texts gives rise to their ubiquity: not only are they found in newsagents, supermarkets and petrol stations, but also in the doctor's waiting room, the hairdressers, and discarded on public transport. Joke Hermes argues that such texts are enjoyable because they are 'easily put down' (1995, p.32). What is more, they are just as easy to pick up. Their audience extends beyond readers who part with their money, taking up subscriptions or occasionally buying a magazine for a train journey. In short, these disposable texts are everywhere – although creating a comprehensive archive of these texts is a challenge, as I explain shortly.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to point out that the magazines examined in this chapter derive from a UK context, whereas pro-ana online has a global dimension. Nonetheless, whilst this analysis is culturally-specific, the discourses in these texts are reflected in pro-ana culture at large, as I demonstrate in later chapters.

My methodology consists of a broad thematic analysis of thirty-one issues of magazines across seven titles from randomly selected weeks and months during the time period 1999 to 2013 (see table below). My reason for focusing on this timeframe is because the first pro-anorexia websites emerged in the late 1990s. By concentrating on this period of time I was able to investigate the construction of the thin ideal in the mainstream media during the advent of pro-anorexia.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date title first published</b>	<b>Publishing house</b>	<b>Main genre</b>	<b>Number of issues analysed</b>	<b>Date range</b>
<i>Closer</i>	2005	Bauer London Lifestyle	celebrity gossip and lifestyle	6	2008-2013
<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	1972	The National Magazine Company, Hearst Magazines	Lifestyle	6	1999-2013
<i>Glamour</i>	2001	Condé Nast	Lifestyle	5	2001-2013
<i>heat</i>	1999	Emap, Bauer Media	celebrity gossip	6	1999-2013
<i>Now</i>	1996	IPC Connect	celebrity gossip	1	2013
<i>Reveal</i>	2004	The National Magazine	celebrity gossip	6	2008-2013

		Company, Hearst Magazines			
<i>Star</i>	2003	Northern & Shell	celebrity gossip	1	2013

For this study, magazines were selected from a number of different publishing houses in order to take in to account a range of viewpoints. This includes the following weekly magazines: *heat*, *Closer*, and *Reveal*, all of which can be considered archetypal celebrity gossip magazines; as well as the monthly publications, *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*, which are more broadly lifestyle magazines but over the past decade have become more celebrity-focused. I also look briefly at *Now* and *Star*. The texts were all selected for their popularity and high readership figures.<sup>13</sup>

I purchased the most recent copies of all the magazines during the week of 7 July 2013. Initially, I had planned to select magazines from the same years and months in order to compare their viewpoints on particular issues of the time. However, I was often confronted with magazines having gone missing from archives or simply never having been available. As such, the data selection is more random than originally intended as

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<sup>13</sup>On its website, Bauer Media, publisher of *heat* and *Closer* boasts a readership of '1,320,000' (2013a) and '1,425,000' respectively for the year 2012 (2013b). It informs potential advertisers no less than three times that *heat* has 'defined a generation' and that '[it] has been instrumental in defining the phenomenon of celebrity that has emerged over the last 12 years' (2013a). A magazine so influential had to be examined in this study.

Hearst Magazines publishes both *Cosmopolitan* and *Reveal*; two ostensibly quite different magazines. The former is more lifestyle-focused and its ethos is described by Hearst on its website as 'inspir[ing] young women to be the best they can be'; it also claims it 'engages with our reader on a deeper emotional level than any other brand, providing solid, intelligent advice she really trusts' (Hearst Magazines 2013a). It boasts a readership of 1,371,000 (ibid.). Similar to *Closer*, '*Reveal* gets behind idle chatter and concentrates on what young women are really interested in; celebrities and showbiz, high-street fashion and real life stories' (Hearst Magazines 2013b). It has a considerably lower readership at 547,000 (ibid.).

Publishers of *Now*, IPC reports that the magazine has a readership of 610,000 based on the first half of 2013 (IPC Advertising 2013). Neither Northern & Shell nor Condé Nast reveals their readership figures.

it was ultimately dictated by availability. I undertook the majority of my archival research in the British Library, bar *heat*, *Closer*, and *Now*. *Now*, I would discover was not available in any archive and so I could only refer to the most current issue. What is more, the British Library was in the process of moving newspapers and periodicals from their site in London to storage facilities in West Yorkshire which meant many of their periodicals were under embargo. Unfortunately for my research, this included all copies of *heat* and *Closer*. I therefore located these publications at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh – although my preliminary searches yielded a number of the magazines missing, including the launch issues of both texts. *heat* was launched in February 1999, but the earliest issue available was from August 1999, and the earliest issue of *Closer* I could access was from 2008, yet the magazine launched in 2005.

Obstacles such as these meant that my requests to the archivists were broad and my data was restricted to what was available. In order to ensure a variation in the time of year, I requested for example ‘any issue from June 2005’. However, in the case of *Closer*, the issues were few and far between so for some years I simply had to request any issue from any month in a particular year. Andrea McDonnell tackled similar issues in her research into celebrity gossip magazines, noting that these texts ‘become a kind of cultural ephemera as soon as they are produced; they do not have an archival home’ (2014, p.17). This illustrates the low cultural value afforded to such publications (Holmes 2005, p.23). Had I wanted to examine *Vogue* magazine, for example, I would have been presented with bound and catalogued copies, in other words, an archival home. The transience of these texts and the difficulties I had comprehensively gathering them adumbrates the challenges I would face when gathering data from pro-ana online spaces. At the same time, it reflects wider cultural assumptions that women’s collections are not as important as those of men (see Pearce 1995).

Having collated as many of the texts as I could access within the time span I wished to examine, each magazine was read from cover to cover, taking the female body as the

main point of interrogation. As McDonnell remarks, 'If twentieth-century gossip was defined by its obsession with sexuality [...] twenty-first-century gossip adds an obsession with the female body (2014, p.93). For the purposes of this study I wanted to interrogate how this obsession with the female body was discursively produced.

## Analysis

My initial examination revealed a set of themes as follows: femininity as a project; veneration and denigration of female celebrities; coverage on body weight. I then used these themes to code the magazines upon second reading and undertake textual analysis. Underpinning these central themes was an understanding that femininity is flawed and in need of improvement; that the reader is personally responsible for her own destiny; that men and women are separate entities. Furthermore, such claims were invariably corroborated by psychological and medical expertise.

The central themes became more prominent and nuanced over the fourteen year time period examined. For instance, the denigration of celebrities increased, with the focus shifting to reality television stars. Coverage around body weight began to focus on the UK dress size eight as an aspirational norm, and pregnancy began to be presented as a form of weight gain that the reader is urged to manage. Furthermore, I found a stark difference in the early issues of *heat* compared to the publication in the latter years. The earlier issues feature longer articles, analysis of film and television, and coverage of male celebrities, whereas a few years after the launch it becomes more centred on female celebrities and in turn more focussed on the body.<sup>14</sup> The dominant themes synthesise in *Closer* magazine which launched in 2005 and predominantly covers celebrity gossip and weight loss. Although I was unable to access the launch issue of *Closer* from 2005, it is significant that the first reference to the idealising of the size eight body appears this year (in *Glamour*).

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<sup>14</sup> According to Holmes (2005), *heat* initially struggled to sell copies and it was only when its editor 'shap[ed] it into a "true celebrity magazine," with an equally clearer address to a female audience' that its success soared (p.23).

## Discussion

### Femininity as a project

The data analysis revealed the way in which every aspect of readers' lives is subject to regulatory surveillance and potential transformation. This appears, for example, in the form of advice on how to lead the ideal life: 'How to have love and a career' (Glamour 2013, front cover) or via the confidant who reveals what men *really* think: 'Men talk: Love, sex, break-ups and bad behaviour' (Cosmopolitan 2013, front cover) Yet the friendly copy invariably masks the propensity for blaming and shaming which circulates through the texts via examples of women who fail to properly self-regulate. A disciplining and normalising gaze is often executed through the medium of the celebrity, who comes to embody the contradictory themes these magazines communicate. She is both idol and scapegoat; too fat and too thin. In short, she is a reminder that femininity is flawed and must be kept under constant surveillance.

The magazines in this study position the slender, white, heterofeminine, middle-class, able-body as the norm around which all other bodies are organised. Bordo (2003, p.66) uses Foucault to suggest that through this process of normalisation 'female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, "improvement"'. As a result, the women depicted in these magazines come to operate as both the disciplined and the discipliners: even when they are presented as falling short of the ideal they confirm its pervasiveness and power. Hence, these false friends operate like the prisoners in Bentham's Panopticon described by Foucault: the all-seeing prison whose purpose is 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (1979, p.201).

Building on this, Sandra Lee Bartky famously argues that women have internalised the Panoptical male gaze thus rendering them self-surveilling subjects (1990, p.72). Although her position has been criticised as 'needlessly reductionist' (Deveaux 1994,

p.226), her thesis has been influential in a contemporary reading of the gaze, with Winch suggesting that in postfeminist 'girlfriend culture', women are complicit (2013, p.6). Winch coins the 'girlfriend gaze' (2013) whereby women are seen to embrace their '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 1975, p.11, emphasis in original) on the understanding that it is in their best interests to invest in their body and self as a neoliberal project (Winch 2013, p.21). Whilst such female self-surveillance is nothing new, Gill argues that it has recently intensified in three ways:

first, the dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation); secondly the extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct; and thirdly the focus upon the psychological – upon the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life. (2007b, p.261)

Such intensification is echoed in the magazines examined. In particular, the calls to regulate are veiled through the rhetoric of choice.

Choice, and an assumed freedom that comes through choice, was visible throughout the sample, with *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* emphasising personal choice and individuality more. Features with headlines and pull quotes such as 'Your top-to-toe life, love and looks makeover' (Cosmopolitan 2002, front cover) and '... if you don't come from one of those enviably close families – you have the rest of your life to build your own' (Glamour 2008, p.45) articulate this focus whilst implicitly stating that the responsibility to the perfect life rests with the individual. A *Cosmopolitan* article urges readers: 'get your body baby ready (even if you don't want one... yet)' (2005, p. 241). It then warns the reader against the many obstacles that could prevent her from conceiving, from smoking to stress, to weight and sexually transmitted diseases (ibid., pp. 241-242). Underpinning this article is the understanding that if the reader does not heed such advice, she only has herself to blame.

As though in dialogue with *Cosmopolitan*, an issue of *Closer* eight years later delivers cautionary tales of celebrities who ignored such guidance and did not adequately self-



regulate (2013, p.14). Celebrity, Nicola McLean discusses her past struggles with eating disorders, confiding that they are to blame for difficulties in conceiving her third child: 'We're trying for another baby but struggling. It's a shame, but it's all my fault because of what I've done to my body' (ibid.). The narrative is reduced to a personal and individual failing. This sentiment is extended later in the same issue as reality television star, Maria Fowler tells *Closer* of her fears of being unable to conceive owing to liposuction and extreme dieting to achieve a size eight figure. She discloses: 'It would be karma if I can't conceive' (ibid., p.27). Both celebrities are presented as regretful and irresponsible, but the overall message is that they have failed at normative femininity. This is in part because postfeminist culture charges women with new time frames during which key life events must be achieved (McRobbie 2009; Negra 2009). Consequently, rituals such as marriage and pregnancy have become commodified and as Negra (2009, p.68) argues motherhood itself is now a form of 'social currency'. In being unable to conceive then these celebrities come to represent failed femininity.

Freedom, for the postfeminist subject is being able to choose from hundreds of different high street styles (Glamour 2013, front cover) or making her own sex video (Cosmopolitan 1999, front cover). The empowerment and independence of feminism is siphoned off and repackaged as a consumer product via the language of choice and autonomy. At the same time, its political potential is hampered. As such, scholars of women's magazines agree that these texts forsake the political in favour of the personal (Ballaster et al 1991; Gill 2007b; Winship 1987; Wolf 1991). Although there is an acknowledgement of the importance of female friendship, solidarity amongst women in these texts is limited. Instead, it is furnished with instrumental value through articles such as, 'The five friends every woman needs', which enumerates the type of friends a woman requires in order to fulfil femininity proper, including for example: 'Pal #1 The

Party Planner' and 'Pal #4 The Soul Sister' (Cosmopolitan 1999, p.119-120). Any notion of sisterhood in these texts is superficial at best.

Magazines such as these present women as an homogenous group and in opposition to men (Ballaster et al 1991, p.9). In so doing, they both erase intersectional difference and essentialise gender categories. This, coupled with their insistence upon the value of physical appearance and the perpetuation of heteronormativity, renders them unlikely feminist allies. However, scholars warn against an outright rejection of women's magazines (Gill 2007b; Hermes 1995; McRobbie 1997; Winship 1987; Wolf 1991). Janice Winship (1987) suggests that if they were to shift their heteronormative worldview, progress could be made. However, heteronormativity persists in the magazines examined.

This is not to say that the magazines do not cover feminist and socio-political issues, rather that they stop short of political comment and calls to action. One explanation for this is the political economy in which they are situated. In her seminal work on women's magazines, Winship explores the way the market has influenced the range and content of magazines as well as the construction of a consumer femininity (1987). Advertising targets women via the publications with false promises of a femininity that can be purchased, thus giving rise to what Wolf terms the 'beauty myth' (1991). As a result, advertising shapes these texts and in turn contributes towards its contradictory viewpoints. Such contradictions are characterised by the placement of an advert for cold sore cream in *Glamour*. The magazine features a five page article on rape in their 'opinion' section where every other page is interspersed with an advert: one for toothpaste, followed by cold sore cream, then mouthwash (Glamour 2013, pp. 84-91). A serious subject is both fragmented by, and absorbed into marketing. 'Rape: a worldview', reads the article; a map of the world with speech bubbles reveals shocking statistics such as: 'Australia: In a 2003 government report, as few as 1% of victims identified their rapist as a stranger' (ibid., p.88). The crux of the article is that rape is

inescapable, yet the adjacent page serves to semantically temper this: 'Don't hide yourself away. Ask your pharmacist for Blistex' (ibid., p.89). Bizarrely, rape and cold sore cream are synthesised.

This device is outlined by Ellen McCracken (1993) who suggests two types of advertising govern women's magazines: the covert and the overt. Covert adverts are ostensibly editorial, but upon examination they are revealed to be endorsing consumer goods with the editorial built around them. The overt advertisement is just that, and is not disguised as editorial copy. In covert advertising, the adverts and the editorial appear to have a reciprocal relationship, negotiating one another: 'a feature may appear in an ad-like form, or an ad in the form of feature' (McCracken 1993, p.50). However what McCracken reveals is the imbalance of this relationship: an advert may reflect the *form* of an editorial feature but it will not accommodate *content* which goes against its own aims.

The advert for cold sore cream is at once overt and covert: it chances upon the reader as they engage in a serious and anxiety-inducing article, undermining both its importance and potential. Furthermore, this plays to postfeminist writer, Katie Roiphe's controversial critique of second-wave feminism where she suggested 'anti-rape initiatives (like Take Back the Night marches) are self-defeating as they underline women's vulnerability and weakness instead of bolstering their strength' (Genz and Brabon 2009, p.71). *Glamour* takes this further, co-opting feminism to service consumerism. If second-wave feminism sought to 'take back the night' then this new form of late capitalist gender politics suggests that taking back the night can only be achieved on the individual level and through the active consumption of a product.

Regulated and controlled by advertising, almost everything is commodified by the magazines: from love to friendship, beauty and sex. They suggest that ideal femininity can be purchased, and this is invariably executed by diagnosing the reader with problems she never knew she had, such as 'toxic fat', which *Glamour* both coins and

then prescribes time-consuming and costly regimes to resolve (2003, pp.182-184).<sup>15</sup> Another way such diagnoses are carried out is by categorising the reader in order to prescribe the tailored solution. *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* are particularly regimented in their approach, providing checklists and rules to be obeyed in order to achieve femininity proper, such as: working out your ideal partner through numerology (Cosmopolitan 1999, p.112-117) and 'The A-Z of sex right now' which tells the reader everything they need to know about sex in 2013 (Glamour 2013, pp.56-60). Moreover, celebrities are deployed as expert educators. Victoria Beckham's ninth 'style rule' for example is to 'shop in kids' stores', she argues of their value for money and unique fit (Glamour 2001, p.206). The project of femininity is governed by laws and it is also a religion, as the sermon on the '7 Gospels of the Beauty Bible' suggests (ibid., p. 256-260).

The magazines examined address the reader as an intimate friend, offering advice and goods it suggests are tailored to *you*. *Now* magazine's seven page spread on selecting the right pair of sunglasses insists: 'Pick your perfect pair: choose the right frame, shape and shade to suit *your* face' (Now 2013, p.64; emphasis in original). In order to find their ideal sunglasses, the reader must select their face shape and hair colour through identification with a celebrity. Seemingly the reader is able to choose, but in actuality she must correspond with a particular shape and conform to a specific style. Fashion in these texts therefore is prescribed, yet it is promoted paradoxically as a means through which one can express individuality (Winship, 1987). Under the guise of promoting diversity, the magazines promote homogenisation and consumerism.

For instance, the headline of *Closer's* diet section in one issue cajoles the reader: 'Love your body!' (2008, p.70) before a five page spread complete with testimonials from celebrities who modified their diet and in turn their body. Here, 'loving your body'

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<sup>15</sup> This coining of 'toxic fat' echoes the insidious use of cellulite: 'an invented "condition" that was imported into the United States by Vogue in 1973; they refer to this texture as "disfiguring", "unsightly", "polluted with toxins". Before 1973, it was normal female flesh' (Wolf 1991, p.227).

translates to putting time and effort in to improving it, as did soap actress Roxanne Pallett who went 'from a size 10 to a size 8 by changing her eating habits' (ibid., p.70). This narrative is exemplary of the magazines studied: the reader must constantly work to achieve the UK dress size eight. The corpus of texts revealed a preference for a slender body throughout, but the first allusion to a specific size (eight) is in *Glamour* in 2005, after this point size eight is continually mentioned, particularly by *Closer* who alludes to it ever more during the time period analysed.

The size eight figure coveted by the magazines is discursively produced at odds with womanliness.<sup>16</sup> An article in *Closer* on pop group *The Saturdays* provides insight into how the women maintain their figures and reveals each of them to be size eight and between eight and eight and a half stone, apart from Rochelle Wiseman who is at this point size ten (Closer 2009, p.72-73). Wiseman seems compelled to defend this: 'I have a *womanly* 50s hourglass shape [...] I never weigh myself but I went up to a size 12 two years ago as I was eating out a lot!' (ibid., p.72, emphasis added). The womanly figure here is presented as requiring explanation, as well as acknowledgement that it should be kept in check. Furthermore, in *Reveal's* spread on the 'shocking weight gains' of pop star Lady Gaga and Frankie Essex (2012, front cover), Lady Gaga is described as 'embrace[ing] – and expos[ing] – her more womanly body on stage' (ibid., p.8). Her *womanly* body is then criticised: 'The US star looked chunkier with rounded thighs and a less honed upper body... She looks puffy and bloated' (ibid., p.8). Women are urged not to 'embrace' their womanliness and those who do are castigated.

Clearly, fitting into size eight clothing is simply not possible for everyone, particularly when size fourteen is considered the norm for British women (Aldridge 2000 cited in Halliwell and Dittmar 2008, p.128). Furthermore, as Emma Halliwell and Helga Dittmar found in their research, typically fashion models are size eight (2008, p.129). At the same time, the size eight body is rarely realised on the pages of the magazines, for

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<sup>16</sup> I use womanliness here to describe bodies that have the characteristics of a woman in contrast to those of a young girl.

they predominantly cover either celebrities who have failed to achieve it, or those in a constant state of maintaining it, as I discuss in the next section. Therefore, the ideal body that pervades the magazines is always held out of reach and at times it seems that certain celebrities are doomed to be toiling on their bodies forever.

Despite this, the magazines purport to provide readers with celebrities' secrets to achieving the sought-after size eight figure. *Glamour's* seven page spread entitled 'meet the cosmetic surgery brides', showcases women who dieted and underwent surgery to be size eight for their wedding day (2005, pp. 98-104) and *Closer* reveals that Rochelle Wiseman has been 'working out for four hours daily to be size 8 for her big day' (2012, p.36). Such articles tacitly acknowledge that striving for this body is not entirely realistic, that it is time-consuming and not a shape everyone can attain. However, ultimately the celebrity body in the magazines examined serves as a reminder that the reader must remain focused on the unending project of femininity.

### **Repudiating fat**

In the magazines analysed, the celebrity is deployed as a guide, but she also operates as a warning. In order to generate norms of femininity, certain women are singled out as spectacles, particularly those who hail from reality television. The data analysis revealed an increase in reporting on reality television stars during the period examined, particularly in the cheaper weekly magazines. For the most part, the reality TV star is framed as undeserving of their latterly acquired fame and fortune and is thus a subject of scorn. Such contempt is invariably rooted in class prejudice. According to Imogen Tyler and Bruce Bennett, despite its apparent absence in neoliberalism, social class is paramount in celebrity culture and the 'celebrity is an increasingly significant means by which reactionary class attitudes, allegiances and judgements are communicated' (2010, p.376; see also Williamson 2010).

Hence, celebrities, and not limited to those from reality television, are convenient mediums through which wider prejudices around the female body can be channelled,

and this is epitomised by the magazines' treatment of the 'chav' and 'WAG' body. Tyler and Bennett describe chavs as 'young, white, working-class men and women as shiftless, tasteless, unintelligent, immoral or criminal' (2010, p.379), specifically noting the way in which the female celebrity chav is disparaged as a result of her failure to correctly perform femininity. WAG, an acronym for 'wife and girlfriend' was coined during the 2006 World Cup to describe male footballers' attendant female partners, since then it has been used to describe all women who date footballers (Bullen 2014). As Jennifer Bullen notes, there are parallels between the media treatment of the WAG and chav who find fame: these women may acquire financial capital, but they 'are symbolically denied social mobility because their nouveau riche spending patterns are seen as distasteful and vulgar' (2014, p.185). Whilst there are some exceptions to the case such as Victoria Beckham (Edwards 2013) and Cheryl Cole (Woods 2014), the majority remain objects of scorn.

This is demonstrated in *Reveal's* (2012) coverage on Frankie Essex of reality TV show, *The Only Way is Essex*, who is purported to have gained weight. Her 'successful slimming' in the past is said to have enabled her to 'finally bag her ideal man' (Reveal 2012, p.4). The implication is that now she has regained weight, she may lose her prized partner. Consequently, the article conflates a slender body with the acquirement of a heterosexual relationship. The text is scathing, alluding to the reality TV star's stomach as a 'muffin top bulging' and is accompanied by photographs of her eating food purchased from fast food chain, McDonald's (ibid., p.4). The correlation of her visible fat and consuming of fast food operate to suggest that an unhealthy diet has led to her weight gain. However, food choice here also operates as a signifier of class and taste (see Bourdieu 1984; Lupton 1996). That is, whilst the images of Frankie eating McDonald's seem to explain her 'bulging' stomach, they also clearly position her as lower class and a legitimate object of disdain, regardless of her fame. As Winch argues:

the working class body is configured as pathological through its association with excessive sexuality, which itself is marked on the body through fat; exploiting the fear of fat is a strategy of class exploitation in an aspirational popular culture. (2013 pp.13-14)

Hence, Frankie Essex, as a representative of lower social class, is a vehicle through which *Reveal* can legitimately express cultural fears around fat and excessive sexuality.

The article alludes to the ideal size eight in the guise of a quote from a close (and seeming) friend who tells *Reveal*, 'At her slimmest Frankie fitted into size 8 clothes, but she's now a size 12' (2012, p.4-5). Frankie has failed to maintain the ideal and at a size 12, has 'piled on the pounds' (ibid., p.5). During the same year, *Closer* reveals that Frankie's co-star, Lauren Goodger is struggling to control her weight and a 'friend' divulges that she has now become a size 12: 'she's gained 8lbs – taking her to around 10st 10lbs – away from her target of a size 8' (Closer 2012, p.4). Such deviations from size eight are presented as failings and it is the role of false friends to police this. The rise to fame and subsequent weight struggles of these women serve as clear warnings over 'the difficulty and undesirability of transgressing class boundaries' (Tyler and Bennett 2010, p.389). The media is ever ready to expose them for who they really are. As Efrat Tseëlon (1995, p.77) argues 'woman is simultaneously constructed and condemned as deceitful artifice'. For the chav or WAG her condemnation can be brutal.

As well as chavs and WAGS, anonymous 'obese' women are regularly exhibited in the magazines analysed. Their large bodies are coded not simply as unattractive, they are also positioned as pathological and dangerous. *Reveal*, for instance, revels in Britain's fattest teen whose weight has risen to 34 stone (2010, pp.28-29). The pull quote reads, 'I can't stop eating myself to death' (ibid.). This choice of quotation serves to emphasise the link between 'obesity' and morbidity thus reinforcing long-held, albeit contested understandings that the former leads to the latter (see Cogan 1999). In a similar vein, *Closer* invites the reader to share in its revulsion of the 'shocking 50 stone mum' (2010, front cover) whose daily diet comprises: 'Three fry-ups, two roast chickens



[...]’ (ibid., p.33). However, not only is she framed as out of control, she also is reported to have enlisted her young daughter who ‘helps her to eat a minimum of 15,000 calories per day’ (ibid.). The involvement of a child serves as further justification to castigate this woman as irresponsible, highlighting the societal belief that fat is a moral concern and therefore this woman is public property (Hartley 2001).

The repudiation of fat in the magazines examined is substantiated by invoking apparently expert opinion. This is particularly prominent in the texts’ coverage of cellulite. The summer issues of the magazines examined are generally replete with advice on how to eradicate it, and the lexis is invariably medical. *Reveal’s* four page spread on cellulite describes it as something Britney, Pink and Lily Allen all ‘suffer’ from (2008, pp.12, 14, emphasis added); Martine McCutcheon is deemed ‘not *immune* to cellulite’ (ibid., p.13, emphasis added). Readers are then provided with an anti-cellulite diet that will not only rid them of the affliction that ‘shocked onlookers’ when they saw it on Kim Cattrall (ibid., p.14), but also help them to ‘drop up to 10lb’ (ibid., p.15). The overriding assertion is that weight loss is key to curing this ill.

*Glamour* corroborates such a claim, consulting the expertise of Dr Trisha Macnair who concedes, ‘The worst case of cellulite I ever saw was on someone who wasn’t overweight [...] However cellulite can look worse on overweight women; slimming to a healthy weight will probably improve your appearance’ (2005, p.348). Cellulite is conceived as a medical problem, a ‘case’ to be dealt with, and the optimum way to do so is to diet. Even if the cellulite remains, being slimmer is akin, not only to being healthy, but to being attractive. By couching cellulite in medical rhetoric, *heat* pathologises it, despite the fact that cellulite is simply ‘healthy adult female flesh’ which has been fallaciously cast as a disorder (Wolf 1991, p.227).

Regardless of how minor the display of fat is, *heat* magazine in particular is intent on exposing it. Even slender model Liz Hurley is told she ‘needs to loosen up her Gucci

belt buckle' (heat 2005, p.61). The statement is accompanied by a photograph of Hurley sitting down with small folds in her stomach, highlighted by a red circle: *heat's* 'Circle of Shame'. This is a regular feature of the magazine which appeared in the texts examined from 2005 until 2008. It highlights predominantly female celebrities' apparent imperfections and invariably centres on rendering any hint of fat unsightly and abnormal, even if the celebrity is otherwise slim.

The magazines' anxiety around any sign of fat extends even to the pregnant body. In the data set, the pregnant and post-pregnant body are increasingly constructed as interchangeable with the fat body. Its large size is conceived as an inconvenience which must shrink down as soon as possible. Throughout the magazines analysed, women are quoted deriding their post-partum bodies. Glamour model Danielle Lloyd bemoans the inevitable weight she gained during pregnancy: 'I still want to look good – I don't feel sexy' (Closer 2010, p.13). However what is more shocking is her joking that the excess weight means she has a 'bum like Beyoncé' (ibid., p.13) By comparing her fat white body to that of black singer Beyoncé, Lloyd implies that the large black female body does not fit the narrow requirements of what is deemed sexually attractive. This corresponds with Andrea Shaw's (2005) argument that Western understandings of beauty repudiate the fat, black, female body in order to reinforce white slenderness as the ideal (I attend to this in detail in chapter four). In the quest to achieve the thin ideal, race is erased, as is the pregnant body, and both are reduced to unsightly adiposity.

Model and reality TV star, Kim Kardashian apparently 'hates how "saggy" her boobs have become' and has been upset 'about her mum-tum' (heat 2013, p.9). However, *heat* reassuringly writes: 'We think she should give herself a break' (ibid.), its friendly copy is seemingly supportive. However, as Myra Macdonald points out, 'These features remind us that the magazine is our trusted friend [...] Turn to the back pages, though, and advertisements for clinics offering cosmetic surgery or liposuction predominate'

(1995, p.208). Sure enough, some pages later *heat* features an advertisement for post-natal breast augmentation; with a testimonial from a woman who claims:

After breastfeeding my boobs shrank to a misshapen C cup [...] After a lot of thought I decided on a breast augmentation with *Transform*. After the op I felt so much better. I'm back to my old self and thrilled with results. (*heat* 2013, p.63)

Together, Kim Kardashian's upset and the advert for cosmetic surgery imply that a post-pregnancy body is a flaw that can be corrected, rather than a natural part of motherhood. As O'Brien Hallstein (2011) suggests, the pressures on women to lose their pregnancy weight represent a backlash against second-wave feminism which reasserts motherhood and beauty as paramount for women. *heat* conceding that Kardashian 'should give herself a break' next to its endorsement for cosmetic surgery renders it the archetypal false friend.

The pregnant body is subject to continual surveillance. The magazines analysed tend to focus on the superficial and negative aspects of pregnancy, with British pop star, turned reality TV celebrity, Kerry Katona, for instance, presenting 'health-fears after putting on 4 stone when pregnant' (Closer 2008, pp.14-15). Although McDonnell points out that 'the tone of the pregnancy narrative depends on the degree to which the expectant celebrity adheres to the moral standard set out by the magazine' (2014, p.94), Katona is frequently subjected to moral judgement by the media (see Tyler and Bennett 2010; Williamson 2010), hence claims to 'fears' around her health are likely deployed to obscure social class judgements.

By the same token, *Reveal* demeans the pregnant body in its article 'Pregnant and panicking' (2011, pp. 34-35) where its subjects are portrayed as irrational and out of control. The magazine uses the classic device of before and after photographs to encourage the reader to recoil at the growing pregnant body of singer Jessica Simpson who is reportedly 'stressed, bloated and turning to junkfood' (Reveal 2011, p.35). The caption beneath the two contrasting images reads: 'Her sexy look made her a star, but

now she feels like a beached whale' (ibid.). Simpson's body is no longer associated with the sexiness her petite denim shorts denoted in the 'before' picture, and she is now likened to a vast animal. This is because, in the current postfeminist climate, 'even though women are now being raised to believe that they can "be anything," they are also taught that being sexy is still central to success as women' (O'Brien Hallstein 2011, p.125). At the same time, a lengthy feature in *heat* warns of the danger of over exercising when pregnant; naming and criticising those who do so (2008, pp. 90-96). Postfeminism thus creates an impossible conundrum where a woman is measured by her sexiness (and implicit slimness); yet in order to fulfil femininity proper she must become a mother. This results in a temporary loss of the slender body which made her acceptable in the first place and therefore she must regain it as soon as possible.

### **Too thin**

Although the analysis reveals a denigration of any form of fat and a preference for a slender body, it also dispenses criticism of the body constructed as too thin. Celebrities who wear the UK dress size eight are, on the whole, applauded; but a celebrity whose size falls below this is met with disgust, faux concern and pity. A headline on the front cover of *Star* magazine delights in the celebrities it suggests have taken weight loss too far. It describes them as, 'Fragile, frightened and fading away!' (Star 2013) and the overriding cause of their emaciation is attributed to mistreatment by men. Following rumours of her husband's cheating, 'Tortured Cheryl sheds a stone' (Closer 2008, p.6-7) and in the same issue, glamour model, Jordan (now known as Katie Price) is described as having 'skeletal legs, hollow cheeks and in agony after her latest surgery' (ibid., p.8).

Such articles may seem contradictory given the magazines' obsession with weight loss, however by marking a select few women as pathologically thin, the texts are able to maintain the bifurcation between 'thinness that is healthy and thinness that is not healthy', which has the effect of further stigmatizing disordered eating and reinforcing

thinness as a signifier of health (McKinley 1999, p.98). As Jones argues of the famous women who take cosmetic surgery 'too far': 'They are necessary for the practice's integration and normalisation; they are the "unnatural" measuring sticks against which the "new natural" can be measured, accepted and condoned' (2008, p.107). Hence, the celebrity who is *too* thin is a valuable asset to the culture of compulsory thinness.

The *too* thin celebrity's weight loss is invariably explained by a personal crisis. *heat* describes singer Miley Cyrus's weight loss thus: 'As the star's personal troubles pile up, the pounds are dropping off...' (2013 p.10). The star's skinny frame is portrayed as the result of inner turmoil and a personal failing. This is exemplary postfeminist neoliberal rhetoric whereby any problem a woman faces is the result of her own misguided choices and is left to her to resolve in an endless project of self-betterment (Chen 2013, p.446). By focussing on the personal rather than the structural, texts such as *heat* evade political comment and perpetuate the primacy of the self-possessed individual.

This is demonstrated by a *Cosmopolitan* article about celebrities' extreme weight loss which suggests that female celebrities are competing with one another to be thinner (2005, pp. 107-108). The article draws upon the expertise of a psychotherapist who normalises the phenomenon:

Psychotherapist Paola Valerio says this sense of distorted body image is a frequent phenomenon when girls get together. "Girls are brought up to be competitive with each other," she says. "Men generally still define themselves by what they've achieved and what they own, but women do so by how they look." (Ibid., p.108)

This prognosis, whilst acknowledging that women are raised rather than born this way, no less emphasises 'that continuing opposition between the feminine as the personal, private world of intimate relationships, and the masculine public world of big business and politics' (Ballaster et al 1991, p.119-120). Women are portrayed as narcissistic, but this is framed as exhibiting normal femininity. Thus, the matter is settled on the individual level. Rather than addressing wider societal reasons as to why women are

encouraged to focus on their appearance in a way that men are not, or what can be done to change it, the status quo is maintained.

At the same time, although extreme dieting is condemned by the magazines, there is no less a tendency to investigate how the celebrity concerned has accomplished it and detail it to their readers, which ironically appears as tacit encouragement. A spread in *heat* entitled 'When skinny gets skinnier' portrays before and after images of celebrities' weight loss (heat 2013, pp. 10-11). It asks: 'Has Millie's wedding diet gone too far?' (ibid., p.11). Reality television star, Millie Mackintosh is said to be undergoing an extreme diet in preparation for her wedding to rapper Professor Green and is estimated to have shrunk to a size six (ibid.). The article may criticise Mackintosh's extreme weight loss, yet it details the diet initiatives she is said to be following: 'Nutritionist Madeline Shaw [...] says to quit sugar and gluten and eat organic' and do the 'Three-day cleanse with Honestly Healthy' (ibid.). *Cosmopolitan*, despite its obsession with celebrities and bodies, does not position itself as part of the culture of compulsory thinness. It criticises celebrities who compete with one another over weight loss, yet ironically in the same issue shows the reader how to find their 'diet personality' (Cosmopolitan 2005 p.231-238). In a later issue, it undertakes an exposé of 'LA's size-0 boot camps', investigating their gruelling reality (Cosmopolitan 2007, pp.106-109). Some pages later, however, it urges the reader, '[get] your diet back on track in the New Year', advising, for example, keeping a diary of everything you eat (ibid., p.124)

One way, then, that the magazines seek to reconcile these contradictions is by distancing themselves from the media at large. An early issue of *heat* has a spread on 'How some stars are taking stick thin to a frightening extreme' (1999, p.36-37). These celebrities are mockingly diagnosed with 'Lollipop syndrome' because their bodies are so thin their heads look disproportionately large and thus resemble lollipops (ibid.). In what seems a bizarre turn, *heat* blames the media and celebrity culture for the women's unnatural frames, asking '[...] with intense pressure from both the industry

and press for female stars to become pin thin, is it any wonder British and American celebrities are getting distorted perceptions of their bodies?' (ibid., p.37). By criticising 'the industry and press' *heat* seeks to position itself as a knowing observer, rather than part of the culture it criticises.

Irony and knowingness pervade postfeminist media and have 'become a way of "having it both ways"' (Gill 2007b, p.266) Texts such as *heat* use irony as a veil for the perpetuation of body shaming. Although Rebecca Feasey (2006) considers the possibility that *heat* could be an empowering postfeminist text because of its deconstruction of the celebrity body, it nonetheless continually criticises women's bodies, even if this is cloaked in humour and irony. As Jo Littler argues, 'the magazine's ironic distance from celebrity culture offers an example of a discourse which is channelled straight back in to feeding it – reselling fame for contemporary popular consumption' (2004, p.22 cited in Holmes 2005, p.36). Certainly *heat* and others in its genre ostensibly deconstruct celebrity bodies, but they also perpetuate the policing of femininity. This contradictory narrative is played out in pro-ana online spaces, which as I argue later, may subvert hegemonic understandings of anorexia, but they ultimately reinforce the discourses they set out to critique. In short, within pro-ana online and the magazines explored in this chapter there is potential for political engagement, but it is never quite realised.

As well as pitying so-called fragile women who have lost weight in excess, the magazines launch cruel attacks on those considered too thin. Victoria Beckham, during the launch of her new fashion label, comes under criticism from *Reveal* because her weight loss has gone 'too far' and made her look masculine (2009, pp. 6-7). The outfit she wears in the accompanying picture reveals no curves and very little flesh; her hair is cropped and gelled back. In short, her look is androgynous. She is subsequently criticised for being unsexy, the inevitable consequence of which is foretold by *Reveal's* associate editor: 'I don't know many men who would fancy Victoria in this' (ibid., p.6).

The importance of heterosexual attractiveness here is underlined. Being slim is paramount, but gender ambiguity it appears, will not be tolerated. The article then summons expert opinion: a fitness expert, an NHS chief dietician, a doctor from an eating disorder clinic, and a group exercise coordinator from Virgin Active concur that she is too thin. The verdict is that Victoria Beckham has failed, not only because of her extreme thinness, but because of her lack of feminine appeal. She has, albeit unintentionally, subverted the feminine norms encouraged by the magazine, and this transgression is punished.

The magazines construct a nuanced ideal which is impossible to maintain. They seek to temper their constant endorsement of dieting with counterclaims from celebrities who allege to accept their bodies as they are. *Dancing on Ice* star, Samantha Mumba is quoted declaring, "I love pies & fry-ups!" and 'has vowed she'll keep her curvy figure – despite living in diet-obsessed LA' (Closer 2008, p.72-73). Yet the accompanying picture shows her slim body devoid of curves. Likewise, coverage of singer Charlotte Church's weight loss is contradictory: 'Charlotte on losing 3st: "My weight doesn't matter to me... I'm secure – I'd be happy at size 20"' (Closer 2010, front cover). However, before and after photos depict Charlotte's weight loss: from a size fourteen to, predictably, a size eight. Her apparent indifference to her weight is at odds with its dramatic drop and her conformity to size eight. This denial of compulsory thinness and its disguise through the rhetoric of self-acceptance is played out in pro-ana online spaces as the next chapter will show.

Simply put, contemporary UK women's magazines offer a confusing representation of modern femininity. They prescribe conformity to ideals of body and lifestyle, yet they cloak this in the rhetoric of individualism and personal choice. The texts draw on the language to feminism to assert women's independence, but beneath this is a worldview which is decidedly conservative. It is this seeming disguise that makes these texts such false friends.



## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the contemporary UK women's magazine is a postfeminist, neoliberal false friend who perpetuates women's *to-be-looked-at-ness* under the pretence of looking out for them. I have shown how the texts examined construct femininity as a project to be worked upon by commodifying every aspect of the reader's life. Whether it is ensuring she is wearing the right sunglasses or adequately preparing her body for pregnancy, the texts examined exert a homogenising gaze. This is further emphasised through examples of celebrity failings which operate to warn against transgression.

The texts tacitly assert that the UK size eight body is the ideal that readers should aim to achieve. This is highlighted by articles on celebrities who have achieved it, as well as those who are toiling to maintain it. The celebrities who are said to struggle the most though are those considered chavs or WAGS, or those who hail from reality TV. These women are derided whether they gain weight or not, thereby revealing the extent to which the ideal body is classed. Nonetheless, the slightest hint of fat on any woman's body is subject to intense scrutiny. Fat is a problem to be solved, and as a result, it is often articulated through the language of medicine.

In spite of their constant castigation of fat, when a celebrity is said to have taken weight loss too far, the magazines regard her with horror or pity. In their condemnation of the *too thin* celebrity, the texts are able to expiate themselves of any blame for the culture of compulsory thinness and maintain a critical distance. However, at the same time, by singling out certain bodies as *too thin*, the magazines situate the dieted, exercised, size eight body as a norm. Celebrities, such as Charlotte Church, above, are then deployed as mouthpieces to underline this assertion. In so doing, the magazines create an understanding of compulsory thinness which is contradictory. On the one hand, it is of utmost importance, as their continual diet guidance and fat-shaming suggests, yet on

the other, it is casually dismissed and the reader is advised to love her body. The texts are ultimately locked in a paradox which is exemplary of postfeminist neoliberalism.

By exploring the contemporary UK women's magazine through the framework of postfeminist neoliberalism, I sought to show how these theories operate in practice. My discussion reveals the contradictions produced by a culture which values the white, middle-class, heterosexual slender body above all other forms of femininity, yet what is perhaps more disturbing is how intent it is on hiding this. At the beginning of this chapter I highlighted the similarities between *Cosmopolitan's* weight-loss guidance and that of a pro-ana forum; the difference being that *Cosmopolitan* sought to disguise such a discourse whereas the pro-ana forum was, at least, direct and honest.

If the magazines examined are obfuscated by a postfeminist, neoliberal veneer which thwarts collective action and feminist goals, how might this be played out in pro-ana online spaces? Unhampered by advertising and antithetical to the mainstream medicalising of anorexia, could they offer a more realistic account of compulsory thinness culture? In the next chapter I investigate the pro-anorexia landscape, examining the way in which these spaces operate in a culture which continually seeks to censor and erase them.

### Chapter 3: ‘This is *not* pro-ana’: in search of the pro-anorexia landscape<sup>17</sup>

‘Thinspiration! Three new celeb diets for you to try’.

(Reveal 2014, front cover)

‘It is hard to understand why we are now being accused of being ‘pro-anorexia’ just because we have used a word, which some people associate with pro-anorexia sites’.

(Jane Ennis, editor-in-chief of *Reveal*, 2014)

#### Introduction

In July 2014, the lexis of pro-anorexia officially entered the mainstream: as the first quotation above states, celebrity gossip magazine *Reveal*’s front cover in the height of summer claimed its celebrity diets could provide readers with thinspiration. After public outrage, *Reveal*’s editor-in-chief, Jane Ennis quickly released a statement defending the magazine’s decision to use the term thinspiration, denying that it was promoting eating disorders. The statement was brief and *Reveal* primarily sought to provide its own definition of the term: ‘The word ‘Thinspiration’ on the cover this week was used to describe the way in which three celebrities have dieted and exercised to lose unwanted pounds’ (Ennis 2014). For *Reveal*, thinspiration was simply about weight loss and they strongly denied it had anything to do with anorexia. This example is important for two reasons: firstly, it shows how the language of ‘reverse’ discourse can be reclaimed by dominant discourses and thus utilised to reinforce the status quo. Secondly, it demonstrates the extent to which the culture of compulsory thinness operates around denial and disguise.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explored the way in which the medical gaze is effective because of its ability to obscure its power, through discourses of health for example, and in the second chapter I showed how the media disciplines women’s bodies through the trope of the postfeminist false friend. In this chapter, I interrogate

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<sup>17</sup> Edited sections of this chapter appear in Cobb (2016a).

the way in which discourses of denial and disguise pervade the contemporary pro-ana landscape. *Reveal's* claim to innocence, as the second quotation in the header delineates, is almost cantankerous in tone; they may use a word that some people associate with pro-anorexia, but that does not mean they are 'pro-anorexia'. This then begs the question, *who* is pro-anorexic? Indeed, *where* is pro-anorexia?

This chapter charts my quest to find these evasive spaces, constituting a critical discussion of the landscape. Here, I recount the methodological and ethical issues I encountered and the findings which arose as I began to develop my trajectory for capturing my primary data. I examine the changes and developments in pro-ana online spaces, arguing that what began as both a community and (to an extent) a subversive 'movement' is becoming both individualised and mainstreamed. I suggest that this is partly a response to censorship. Internet moderators block and remove pro-ana content and in turn users carve out creative ways to circumvent censorship and evade deletion. This ranges from disguising spaces through discourses of health or beauty, to coining obscure hashtags, or denying that content is pro-ana through disclaimers. In negating such claims however, users not only avoid censorship, they are also able espouse views that would otherwise be considered pro-ana. As such, I argue that through denial and disguise of pro-ana, users of these platforms are engaging in discourses of legitimising and normalising.

I begin this chapter by looking briefly at the history of pro-ana online and examining what remains of the original forums and websites that one might categorise under the heading 'pro-ana'. I undertake an analysis of a selection of these older sites whilst drawing on secondary research so as to establish the background against which the phenomenon – and the mainstream appropriation of its lexis – has taken place. I then move on to an analysis of the current landscape, drawing upon theories of postfeminist neoliberalism in order to explore how social media has influenced pro-anorexic expression. I also examine how practices of censorship enacted by these and other

digital platforms have led users to communicate primarily through images. Throughout my analysis I weave in the methodological and ethical hurdles I encountered as I sought to map a territory deemed both pathological and private. In doing so, I explore the blurred boundaries between what constitutes being #proana or simply #thin and #sexy. Finally, and responding to the fact that many of the bodies which adorn the image boards borrow from pornography, I examine the way in which the eroticising of the anorexic body serves to render it mainstream. Through these various analyses and discussions I argue for a theory of normalisation.

## **Methodology**

When I first embarked upon this intellectual journey I envisaged a case study-led project focusing on pro-anorexia forums and websites. However, Ferreday's (2009, p.214) observation that 'although pro-ana still exists it is now more scattered and more secretive', became increasingly prescient, and I was not surprised to discover that a number of the spaces I originally planned to study had either been removed, relocated, or were no longer being updated. Owing to censorship by Internet Service Providers, webhosting services and forum moderators, pro-ana spaces are renowned for engaging in 'an elaborate game of cat and mouse to remain one step ahead of the "authorities"' (Crowe and Watts 2014, p.3), and at times it felt that I became (however unwillingly) another authority from which they sought to hide. From the outset I had to modify my intended methodological approach in order to adapt to the texts I was seeking to analyse. Such modification set the precedent for a project whose methods have constantly needed to evolve in order to capture 'recalcitrant' data and respond to the shifting landscape of digital culture. In short, my methodological approach became a research finding itself.

Previous research into pro-ana online has adopted various methods, from interviewing pro-ana users face-to-face (Rich 2006), over email, Skype or telephone (Williams and

Reid 2010; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013), through e-questionnaires (Rodgers, Skowron, and Chabrol 2012), and surveys of forum users (Ransom, La Guardia, Woody, and Boyd 2010). Gavin, Rodham, and Poyer (2008) adopted a method akin to lurking in order to observe passively a pro-ana site, whereas other researchers chose to become more directly involved by joining publically available sites and forums under pseudonyms (Gailey 2009), and participating in discussions (Fox, Ward, and O'Rourke 2005). Nic Crowe and Mike Watts (2012) befriended 'gatekeepers', seeking their permission to join forums, as well as conducting interviews with pro-ana users. Similarly Natàlia Cantó-Milà and Swen Seebach (2011) undertook a combination of discourse analysis of posts and interviews with former pro-ana users.

One study in particular stands out where the researcher masqueraded as a pro-ana user and entered private forums in an attempt to better understand the phenomenon (Brotsky and Giles 2007). This method is somewhat problematic. At best, its results could be manipulated by the researcher's direct involvement; at worse, it betrays the trust of users. Nonetheless, I do not profess that my own methods are flawless and similar to Holmes, there were times when I felt guilty for lurking in a "'private" public space' (2015, p.103) and for not identifying as anorexic myself.<sup>18</sup> I thus sought to be self-reflexive throughout the research process, from data collection to writing up.

Overall, textual analysis of pro-ana online spaces was the preferred method of enquiry for a number of scholars (see for example: Burke 2012; Ferreday 2003, 2012; Polak 2010; Strife and Rickard 2011). This would be my preferred method too, and in line with Ferreday (2009), I approach online spaces as texts. Although I use the term 'space' interchangeably with 'text', I do not regard online spaces as places we visit, which are distinct from our everyday lives, but rather, I conceive these spaces as a

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<sup>18</sup> Holmes acknowledges guilt over her position as a person who had overcome anorexia and was able to observe from the outside (2015). In other research she reflects openly on her experiences with anorexia in 1990s and how they might differ to the experiences of her research participants (2016).

form of representation. As a result, whilst I recognise that human subjects have created these online texts, this project did not seek to directly engage with these people as authors. Further, as Ferreday notes, with online texts we can never truly know who the author is or how 'real' they are (2009, p.207; see also Hine 2009, p.120). These texts and interactions exist solely online, and 'to demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for "context" presumes that virtual worlds themselves are not contexts' (Boellstorff 2008, p.61).

Pro-ana online spaces are inherently intertextual and a key facet of pro-ana culture is the selecting, curating and marking of images as pro-anorexic or thinspirational. This thesis places importance not on who produced these texts, but how they are used and the meanings they produce. It is also worth noting that although some authors directly referenced having an eating disorder either at the time of posting or in the past, many did not, and it is possible that such texts were created by individuals who simply wanted to lose weight and used pro-ana culture as a way of servicing this. Either way, the discourses these spaces construct are the point of interrogation for this thesis. As a result, I deemed it unnecessary to engage in 'embodied ways of knowing' and instead approached these online spaces as cultural formations (Markham 2008, p.808).

### **Ethical considerations**

My research was deemed high-risk by the Arts and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the University of Sussex and my request for ethical approval underwent a number of adjustments before being approved on its third submission. The board's main concern was that I was dealing with sensitive data produced by vulnerable young people in private spaces. Such a response is symptomatic of the silencing and pathologising discourses surrounding anorexia that prevent the anorexic voice from being heard (Bell 2009, p.155; Polak 2010, p. 94). It also suggests a tendency to apply ethical principles universally rather than 'through the application of practical judgement attentive to the specific context' as the guidelines produced by the Association of

Internet Researchers advise (2012, p. 4). As a feminist and a researcher in gender studies, I believe it is crucial that the texts produced by individuals in pro-ana online spaces are given recognition rather than driven further underground. Moreover, a dearth of research into such vilified groups would render them at best misunderstood, as contemporary media reporting is doing, or at worst invisible. For as I have described thus far, pro-ana is not always what it may ostensibly seem. Consequently, analysis of the boundaries between what constitutes legitimate acts of body disciplining, such as those promoted by the women's magazines explored in the previous chapter, and the 'marginal' pro-ana spaces that such acts of censorship construct is central to this thesis.

Nonetheless, as a feminist I acknowledge that there is no 'linear move from silence to voice' (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010, p.2) and during the ethical application process it seemed I was being censored along with my research subjects. This was troubling not only because of the impact it could have on my project, but also because, all the while, pro-ana content was being manipulated to market weight-loss products, as I discuss later in the chapter. I, as an academic seeking to understand this phenomenon, was denied entry, whereas stealthy advertisers were exploiting these spaces for economic gain. The lack of ethical consideration on the part of the advertisers requires more discussion than can be undertaken in this chapter, but as R. Benjamin Shapiro and Pilar N. Ossorio warn: 'the goals of most academic research surely have as much social value as selling more products to SNS users. Providing marketers greater access than academic researchers to people's online information would be an ethically dubious outcome' (2013, p.2). For me, it was crucial that I be able to proceed with this research.

As a researcher I consider the privacy and anonymity of the individuals who use pro-ana online spaces to be paramount. In line with other researchers of the phenomenon, I focus solely on publically available data (see for example: Boero and Pascoe 2012;



Dias 2003; Day and Keys 2008a; Giles and Newbold 2011; Miah and Rich 2008; Borzekowski et al 2010). All posts to which I refer are in the public domain and private accounts were not accessed. I did not set up a user account for any of the forums or social media platforms, nor did I interact with members.

An important consideration when using publically available data is that it cannot be traced back to its author via search engines (Markham 2008, p.813). As a result, I follow Amy Bruckman's (2001) system of 'heavy disguise' which ensures that any sensitive online data is rendered anonymous and untraceable.<sup>19</sup> Bruckman advises the researcher undertake the following steps in order to achieve 'heavy disguise' of such data:

- The group is not named.
- Names, pseudonyms and other identifying details are changed.
- Verbatim quotes are not used if a search mechanism could link those quotes to the person in question.
- Some false details may be deliberately introduced.
- For example, if you are studying a support site for a chronic disease, you might change the disease in published accounts.
- No one would likely recognize the subject (except perhaps the subject him/herself).
- Someone deliberately seeking to find a subject's identity would likely be unable to do so.
- Details that would be harmful to the subject if disclosed may be revealed, because the subject has been carefully anonymized. (2001, np)

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<sup>19</sup> Bruckman proposes four levels of disguise when using data gathered from the Internet. Depending on the sensitivity of the data, she advises it should be approached thus: 'on a continuum from no disguise, light disguise, moderate disguise, to heavy disguise' (2001, np).

In line with Bruckman's guidance, I have given pseudonyms to all usernames, titles of forums, websites and discussion threads, and all quotations have been paraphrased. Links for individual posts have been omitted entirely. Importantly though, I have created pseudonyms and paraphrased quotes in such a way that their provenance is obscured, but the overall sentiment of the site, user, or post is retained. The screenshots and images in this thesis have all been scrubbed for identifying information and I have used a pixelating tool (similar to Photoshop) to 'smudge' names and links. Finally, the mode of textual analysis I employ has allowed me to build up a set of themes that further conceals the specific provenance of the data. This research does not involve participant-observation, but is instead a text-based study of digital authorship.

### **Mapping the terrain**

After reviewing the scholarly literature on pro-anorexia, I noted that the key terms used to describe these spaces were 'pro-ana' and 'thinspo'. I subsequently undertook two sets of online searches, inputting 'pro-ana' and 'thinspo' respectively into four search engines – *Google*, *Bing*, *Yahoo*, and *Ask* – and recording the respective results from pages 1, 2, 5, and 8. I then selected for further investigation the links which appeared the most. By carrying out simple queries I sought to replicate the kind of search undertaken, for example, by 'young people without requiring technical expertise (rather than by using a more technically complex route)' (Bond 2012, p.15). However, given the controversial status of pro-ana online it is likely that results had previously been removed from searches. In her virtual ethnography, Christine Hine argues that search engine tools are not neutral and they 'favour the web designer with high visibility' (2000, p.89). It is therefore possible that the data examined in this study had already been manipulated by the search engines which ordered it. As Tarleton Gillespie puts it, 'data is both already desiccated and persistently messy' (2014, p.170). Consequently whilst I do not suggest that this study deals with pure data, it nonetheless dovetails with the spaces produced from searches undertaken by the everyday user and, as I will

demonstrate, such spaces are not strange or marginal but, instead that they are decidedly normative.

The more commonly listed hyperlinks generated by these searches led to forums and websites, a vast number of which were no longer being updated, or whose content appeared frozen. In other cases, the listed hyperlinks led to notices indicating that the site had been removed. As I continued with my research, it increasingly seemed that pro-ana content had migrated and would not be as easy to find as I had initially thought. Nonetheless, I recorded these spaces, building one database consisting of 10 frozen spaces (see Appendix, table 1). Although these sites and forums were no longer being updated, they nonetheless constituted an important part of my analysis.

I found that the search results which yielded functioning links were primarily those on microblogging platform, Tumblr, and social media platforms, Instagram and Pinterest, as well as bulletin board, Reddit, even if some of the results were simply noting that they had banned pro-ana content.<sup>20</sup> However, this produced fifteen active, publicly available spaces which allowed me to build a second database (see Appendix, table 2). This consisted of eight Tumblr accounts, three self-hosted sites, one *blogger.com* account, one *LiveJournal* account, one *We Heart It* account, and one Reddit page, although during the research period a number of these were frozen or removed.

One space in particular evades categorisation: so-called ‘pro-skinny’ celebrity gossip site *Skinny Gossip*. It arose from a ‘thinspo’ search, but it does not profess to be a pro-ana space and denies this fervently. Although denial and disguise is a central tenet of pro-ana culture as I discuss in detail later, *Skinny Gossip* itself appears to be an example of a celebrity gossip blog merging with pro-ana sentiments. As such, I refer to

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<sup>20</sup> These preliminary searches also yielded links from Twitter. However, the archiving programme I used did not adequately capture data from this platform which meant I could not be sure that the sampling of Twitter was rigorous enough. As a result, it was excluded from my analysis. As I point out later on, the volume of data I gathered from the other social media platforms meant the absence of Twitter data was not a problem.

this site by its original name and provide a link to it in the bibliography. Nonetheless, in line with Bruckman's guidance, I have deployed a system of 'moderate disguise' (2001) when dealing with *Skinny Gossip's* forum and Tumblr. In my analysis, I focus only on the public forum, and have provided its discussion threads with pseudonyms and I have paraphrased quotations. This is to respect the fact that, in spite of *Skinny Gossip's* claims to be a celebrity gossip site, it nonetheless attracts pro-ana discourses and users.

In addition to these spaces, my searches yielded seven pro-ana 'marketing' spaces: these consisted of blogs and websites which were ostensibly user-led, but closer inspection revealed that they were selling dieting products and using pro-ana vocabulary to do so. These spaces were recorded for analysis too (see Appendix, table 3). As a result of their not being 'genuine' pro-ana sites, I quote from them verbatim and provide links to them in the bibliography. Finally, my searches also produced two spaces which were focused exclusively on recovery (see Appendix, table 4). As I have pointed out, pro-ana spaces are not monolithic: some forums and sites describe themselves as pro-ana, but feature recovery content and *vice versa*. These two spaces, however, were dedicated solely to recovery. Nonetheless, because they arose from my searches, I made the decision to include them for analysis.

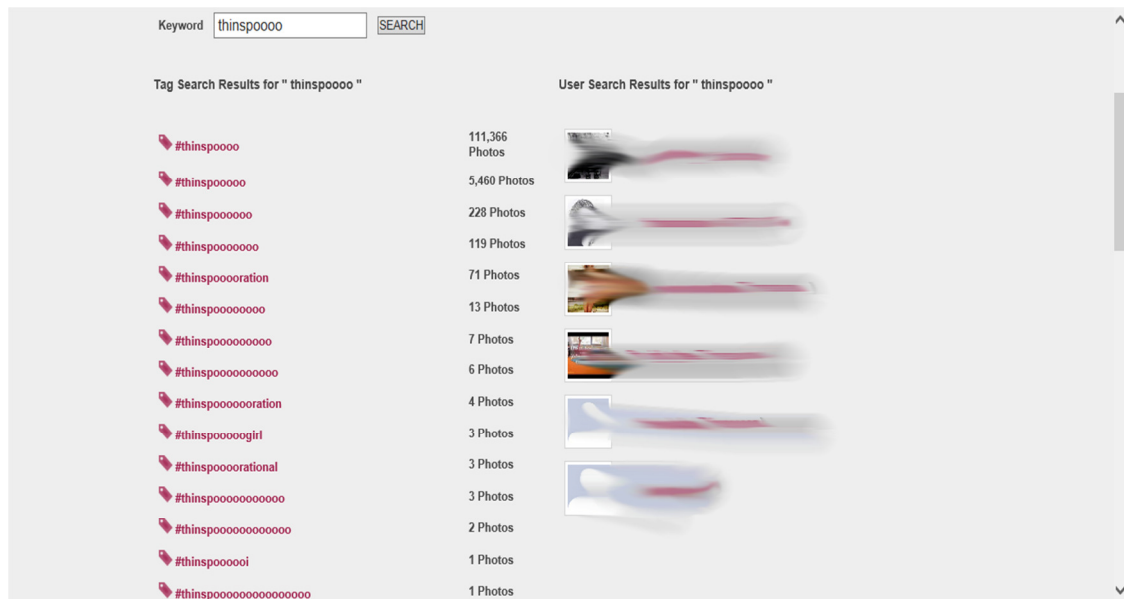
Having noted that content was predominantly arising on social media spaces, I then undertook a second round of searches on Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest, and what I found altered the trajectory of my research. These platforms have all taken steps to remove pro-ana content, advising users accordingly in their respective policies (moves that I discuss in detail later in this chapter). What this censorship meant, however, was that initial searches on these platforms suggested that there was ostensibly very little to be found in terms of pro-ana content. Echoing my first round of search engine results, it seemed as though pro-ana content had once again been and gone.

In spite of this, the platforms varied in how strictly they adhered to their content removal policies: Instagram suggested that pro-ana and thinspo simply could not be found, and although Pinterest yielded results for pro-ana and thinspo, content was not updated over time, thereby appearing frozen like many of the older sites and forums. Tumblr was less stringent: pro-ana and thinspo were not blocked, but the terms did generate Content Advisory warnings. Therefore, users were tagging posts with 'thin' and 'ana' to identify their content as pro-ana and ensure against censorship. I wanted to see if the same was happening on other platforms too and sure enough it was.

I inputted the following searches into Webstagram,<sup>21</sup> the searchable web browser for Instagram: [web.stagram.com /tag/ana/](http://web.stagram.com/tag/ana/) and [web.stagram.com /tag/thin/](http://web.stagram.com/tag/thin/). The images produced by these searches revealed numerous other hashtags. I was intrigued by terms such as #thynspiration and #thynspo; it seemed that users were circumventing censorship and deletion with obscure spellings and terms. Clicking the hyperlink for #thynspo generated images with accompanying hashtags such as #thinspoooo, the variations upon which seemed endless. Figure 1 below, indicates the results generated from my search for #thinspoooo. It appeared that pro-ana users were in a linguistic battle with Instagram; and 111,366 photos tagged with thinspoooo suggested that they were winning. Furthermore, each hashtag search produced new spelling variations on thinspo and pro-ana, as well as yielding new terms such as 'bonespo'. During the research period 'bonespo' appeared to be a relatively new coinage because, across each of the social network sites examined, it generated results without warning statements. It seemed it was yet to arouse the suspicion of platform moderators.

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<sup>21</sup> At the point I was undertaking data collection, Instagram had not yet made their content searchable on a web browser without signing in and setting up an account, Webstagram was thus the optimum way to search for and save results.



**Figure 1:** the results of a #thinspoooo search on Instagram.

I therefore moved through various iterations of key terms in order to establish a method for capturing my primary data, all the while modifying my searches as hashtags took me on different routes. For instance, when I discovered a new term, provided it was generating a significant number of results, such as the first variation of thinspoooo in figure 1, I interrogated it further. Finally, once I established which hashtags were appearing most frequently in each of the platforms, I built another database comprising social media search terms (See Appendix, table 5). The evolving linguistic culture of pro-ana and the cat and mouse game that users appear to be engaged in with key social media platforms ensures that one can never fully map the terrain of pro-ana online. However, using the technique identified here, I was able to secure a sizeable amount of data from pro-ana web users.

### Data collection

The nature of my data necessitated two separate methods of collection. Where the sites or forums had been frozen, or were no longer updated, I took manual screenshots of their constituent pages, saving them as PNG files in password-protected folders. With the active spaces, including social media, it would not be possible to manually screenshot and save such a vast volume data, and so I turned to automated search

processes using the archiving programme, *GNU Wget*. This is a free software package which I set to run daily at midnight to collect data based on hashtag and keyword searches as well as selected individual webpages themselves. I set *Wget* to store and save each page organising them into folders by date. These folders were then divided up by the name of each online platform, then further organised by the name of the hashtag or search term. Files were saved in html document format; this kept all the content in the format of a webpage, as it looked at the moment it was archived and crucially, allowed for access offline. Again, these were stored in password protected folders. I ran *Wget* for four months, gathering approximately 59,000 screenshots of websites and posts across the social media platforms. Having initially feared there would be a dearth of data, I was now encountering the opposite issue. As Tom Boellstorff (2008, p.75) notes of ethnographies of virtual worlds, one is often met with an abundance of data and the challenge is how to effectively filter through this, a point which I address next.

### **Data selection**

During the four month process of data collection, I regularly checked my results, modifying the search criteria if certain hashtags or sites were no longer producing new data. By the end of the fourth month, the data was reaching saturation point so I made the decision to stop *Wget* and ceased collecting new data. In some spaces saturation was the result of censorship which meant images began to recur in the data trawl. Overall I found certain themes arose repeatedly. I selected the central two months of data collection for analysis as these were the most complete: the first month having been very much trial and error, and the fourth and final month being highly repetitive. This left me with around 29,500 webpages and social media posts which was still an unwieldy amount with which to undertake meaningful textual analysis. Consequently, I selected days at random across the two month period, omitting recurring posts, which resulted in approximately 260 pages of text from forums, blogs, and websites (including

manual screenshots from the active and frozen sites) and 1,459 unique posts resulting from hashtag and keyword searches (of which there were 567 Instagram posts; 432 Tumblr posts; 360 Pinterest posts; 100 Reddit posts). I printed all the posts and coded the data for dominant themes in both text and images. From here I was able to identify the themes which would formulate the subject of each of my analysis chapters.

My understanding of pro-ana culture aligns with Abigail Bray's (1996) critique of anorexia as a reading disorder. Bray counters the widely adopted theory that anorexia is borne out of young women's inability to *read* critically and that they are passively duped by the mass media, suggesting that this 'ignore[s] the multiplicity of social contexts operating in the everyday' (1996, p.421). It is therefore my intention to present analyses of pro-ana texts which engage with the multitude of readings their authors have brought to them. Nonetheless, I recognise that my interpretation of these texts has produced this thesis and that they 'present a particular reality of the object of analysis' (Markham 2008, p.802). Whilst I have made every attempt to approach the pro-ana phenomenon as impartially as possible, ensuring the data guided my thesis, as Mary Maynard points out 'no feminist study can be politically neutral, completely inductive or solely based in grounded theory. This is a contradiction in terms' (1994, p.23). That is to say, I selected instructive posts and images that I felt were significant and/or were of particular interest to me. Finally, the data I draw on is from a snapshot in time, and is an illustrative representation of pro-ana online culture rather than an exhaustive depiction.

### **A note on referencing**

As I stated above, all pro-ana online spaces have been given pseudonyms and web links have been removed. As a result, standard referencing was not possible, nor in this instance, was it logical. I therefore use the following citation method: all websites, blogs, and forums which can be considered pro-ana are indicated in italics in brackets with the year the site was last updated. For example: (*Guide to Ana* 2010). These in-



text citations do not refer to a full reference in the bibliography, instead, I direct the reader to the appendix where they will be able to see a list of all spaces cited, in alphabetical order based on type (frozen, active etc.).

Where I have referenced pro-ana forum threads, the title of the thread has a pseudonym and is indicated in brackets in inverted commas, accompanied by the year the discussion took place. For example: ('Ana Talk' 2014). Again, a link does not appear in the bibliography, therefore, I direct the reader to the appendix where table seven indicates all cited forum thread titles and their host sites. Finally, all other online spaces, whether news sources or pro-ana marketing sites, for instance, follow standard Harvard referencing with the author and date in brackets, are not italicised, and therefore appear in the bibliography in the usual way.

### **The original landscape and its remains**

Research into pro-anorexia predominantly comprises an investigation into what has been conceived as a 'community' (Boero and Pascoe 2012; Brotsky and Giles 2007; Day and Keys 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Ferreday 2003, 2009; Giles and Newbold 2011; Polak 2010; Stommel and Koole 2010; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2013).<sup>22</sup> Such spaces are described in terms of Malcolm R. Parks' (2011) definition of an online community in that they promote a sense of identity and togetherness against the odds. When I began this research, I was seeking the communities to which the afore-mentioned scholars refer, yet I was confronted with what I can only describe as a pro-ana graveyard. This consisted of numerous spaces, formerly having been active and thriving with conversation. Now, they were sitting silently, invariably not having been updated for years. In some cases, authors of the sites had fled to new platforms and

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<sup>22</sup> Following Benedict Anderson's definition, I understand 'community' here as 'imagined', whereby the persons occupying the pro-ana community 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds each lives the image of their communion (1991, p.6).

given their sites new names, some became sites dedicated to recovery from anorexia. Others simply remain abandoned, frozen in time.

In the 'about' section of pro-ana site and forum, *Anamiaworld*, the author provides a comprehensive overview of the various guises the space has assumed as a result of being closed down by Internet moderators (2013). Likewise its sister forum, *Thinspo HQ* (2013) recounts undergoing similar changes after deletion. On the landing page, the author concludes that the forum has now changed from 'hard-core pro-ana to a unique support forum', adding 'Big changes are afoot- pro-ana is evolving' (*Thinspo HQ* 2013). Nonetheless, clicking the links to access the forum for both *Anamiaworld* and *Thinspo HQ* simply yields: 'page cannot be displayed'.

Pro-ana forum, *Thin & Beautiful* has also undergone a number of changes, stating that its original site is now functioning as an archive and it has a partner site, *Thin & Beautiful 2*, which requires users to log in to view and submit content. It explains that it has changed for the following reasons:

I know we've presented ourselves as a site that's not "pro-ana." However, we still respect those who want to make "pro-ana" about support instead of harm. But it seems we now have a reputation for being a strict "pro-recovery" forum when the only change we made between *Thin & Beautiful 2* and the original *Thin & Beautiful* is no underwear pics and no supporting unhealthy diets. (*Thin & Beautiful* 2013)

The statement is contradictory which makes it, perhaps intentionally, difficult to ascertain whether the site is pro-ana or not. It is keen to shed the label of pro-ana which has become synonymous with harm, yet it seeks to retain supportive elements. It also strives to dissociate itself from the 'underwear pics' which seem to be ubiquitous across contemporary thinspo spaces. This space may be grappling with its own identity but, what it does make clear, is that there is a need for it to exist.

Where some closed forums and sites posted explanations to their users, others had automated messages such as those hosted on webs.com which read 'We're sorry this

website is frozen', or in the case of Yahoo! searches: 'You have reached the cached page for [...]' and beneath this statement in smaller text: 'Yahoo! is not responsible for the content of this page'; The cached site itself displays an emblem, 'Anorexia is a lifestyle, not a disease' (*Living pro-ana* 2013). Content on blogger.com site, *Anything for Thin* had ceased updating in July 2013 with commenting having terminated roughly around the same time. This suggests either that the site had been frozen or, the community may have been warned independently that its leader would move to a new space. Nonetheless, the statistics counter at the bottom of the page carried on regardless: 'You are visitor # 02075860' (*Anything for Thin* 2013), but there was no-one there to greet.

Many of these older spaces draw on religious rhetoric and rituals of the Judeo-Christian tradition in their quest for thinness (Bell 2009; Day and Keys 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Lelwica et al 2009; Mulveen and Hepworth 2006; Nash 2006; Norris et al 2006). There are numerous religious-themed sites still online (seemingly abandoned for newer platforms and beliefs), a plethora of which centre around being an 'angel' of Ana. Such sites construct Ana as a leader the users worship and in whose presence they are always inferior. Eda R. Uca's (2004) self-published text, *Ana's Girls* explores the phenomenon in its original form. Uca draws upon her observations of the community, suggesting that it held a 'genuine state of sisterhood between propagators of sites; they love each other, cling to each other, like refugees from a broken state' (2004, p.21-22). She quotes verbatim the 'Ana Creed' and the 'Ana Psalm' which details the beliefs of followers of Ana such as, 'I believe in calorie counters as the inspired word of god, and memorize them accordingly [...] 'Strict is my diet. I must not want' (2004, p.44 and p.46). Today, many pro-ana online spaces have moved away from such manifestly pious language and have gravitated instead towards a more 'self-help' style of communication, using motivational and inspirational slogans and rhetoric, which I discuss in detail below.

Contrary to media reporting that pro-ana online spaces are ‘recruiting grounds for eating disorders’ (Boero and Pascoe 2012, p.28) the older sites and forums examined in this study frequently displayed their own warnings about the content viewers will access if they click through. This was invariably enacted by denouncing responsibility for the content on the sites, such as *Kneeling to Ana* (2005) which asserts: ‘If you are not ana or mia, have any kind of ED or are recovering, I strongly advise that you do not enter.’ Likewise *Guide to Ana* (2010) warns, ‘This site is not for anyone who is underage or easily influenced. Entering this space declares that you are of legal age and are therefore responsible for any consequences that may arise from viewing this content’. Other spaces address potential viewers more emotively: ‘Anorexia is NOT cool. If you can access help, please do. If you don’t have to pursue this road, be thankful. Anorexia is unimaginably painful’ (*Fallen Ana* 2010). This statement is then followed by hundreds of photographs of glamorously-dressed, skinny celebrities. Spaces such as these therefore create their own filtering mechanisms in attempts to protect the vulnerable girls that cause so much concern for the media.

However, in current day pro-ana spaces these user-led warnings have been replaced with the platforms’ own public service announcements, as spaces such as Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest seek to exert control over the pro-ana landscape. At the same time, pro-ana users deploy mechanisms of denial and disguise in order to evade such platforms’ censorial devices. In light of this, I will now discuss the current pro-ana landscape and call into question the move from the textual, dialogue-led spaces such as forums and blogs to the explosion of image boards and the visual-centric nature of current social media.

### **The current pro-ana landscape**

In recent years, whilst many of the pro-ana discussion forums discussed above have become harder to find or have been taken offline, thinspo image boards on sites such

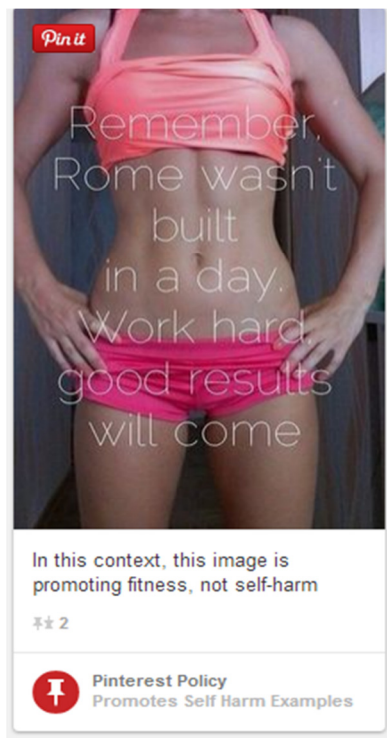
as Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest have increased. Despite platforms such as Tumblr declaring back in 2012 that they would remove all pro-ana blogs (Ostroff and Taylor 2012), Instagram disabling pro-ana and thinspiration hashtags, and Pinterest and Tumblr displaying eating disorder warnings, thousands of images are posted every day which are identifiable as pro-ana. These images tend to conform to mainstream beauty ideals and/or eroticise the anorexic body. Furthermore, new ways of identifying, or rather obscuring, pro-anorexia content have emerged including creative hashtags such as #thynspoo or #ana; spaces claiming to be 'healthy thinspo'; and others bearing disclaimers to deny that they are pro-ana. Although some research on the impact of censoring hashtags has been carried out (Chancellor et al 2016; Moreno et al 2016; Olszanowski 2014), it does not address how attempts to circumvent such censorship are bringing about discourses of normalisation. My analysis addresses this gap by exploring how the restrictions imposed by Internet moderators, as well as media vilification are contributing to the mainstreaming of pro-ana culture.

Although there are still forums to be found (such as *Pro-ana for Me*) the sense of community one detects in the older spaces has been fragmented through the censoring practices and the text-light framework of the social media through which it is now being communicated. Images have always been important to pro-ana users, but even where contemporary platforms allow for text and discussion, it is minimal, and the existing pro-ana 'community' is predominantly composed of hashtags and images. The reasons for this reduction in dialogue are twofold: firstly, forums and sites are being removed because they are deemed dangerous by Internet moderators, and secondly, as with the majority of Internet users, these groups have migrated to social media platforms. Vincent Miller suggests this migration 'demonstrates the simultaneous movements away from communities, narratives, substantive communication, and towards networks, databases and phatic communion' (2008 p.398). This is reflected in pro-ana online spaces. They are fragmented and visually-centred not only because of the architecture

of the social networks in which they sit, but also owing to their controversial nature, subsequent censorship, and the current neoliberal climate which is characterised by a shift in emphasis from the community to the individual.

### **‘Everything okay?’: modes of censorship**

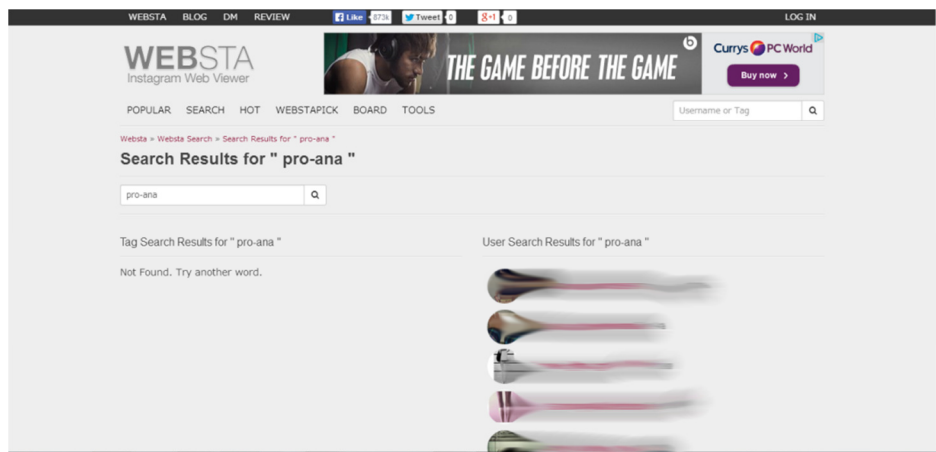
The social media spaces examined in this study all have policies around removing content they consider harmful and disordered eating is included in this. In its community guidelines, Tumblr informs its users thus: ‘We aim for Tumblr to be a place that facilitates awareness, support and recovery, and we will remove only those posts or blogs that cross the line into active promotion or glorification of self-harm’ (Tumblr 2014). In spite of this, a considerable amount of content which promotes self-harm remains online. The question remains whether this is because it is untraceable by Tumblr or because ‘the line’ to which they refer is ever blurred. Pinterest is more explicit about the types of posts it will allow and in its ‘Acceptable Use Policy’ it provides examples of permissible content, as indicated in figure 2 below.



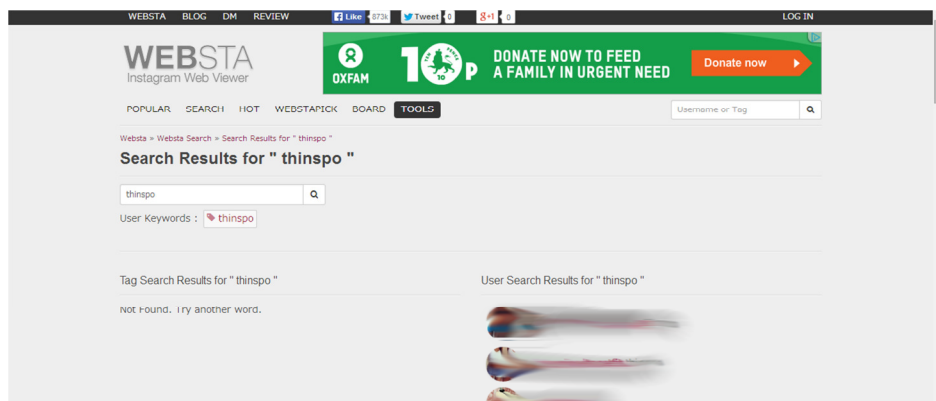
**Figure 2:** a screen shot of Pinterest's Acceptable Use Policy, 2014.

This image of a toned stomach emblazoned with a motivational platitude is considered acceptable because Pinterest argue ‘it is promoting fitness, not self-harm’ (*Acceptable Use Policy* 2014). The language of this example post is typically neoliberal, framing the body as a project to be worked upon which Pinterest deems legitimate. However, that it renders it necessary to provide an example of what is acceptable illustrates how easily such boundaries are blurred.

Finally Instagram, in its community guidelines states that ‘any account found encouraging or urging users to embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or to cut, harm themselves, or commit suicide will result in a disabled account without warning’ (2014). It does not indicate exactly how it defines encouragement of eating disorders, but a hashtag search for ‘pro-ana’ or ‘thinspo’ on Instagram returns the result, ‘Not found’ (see figures 3 and 4).

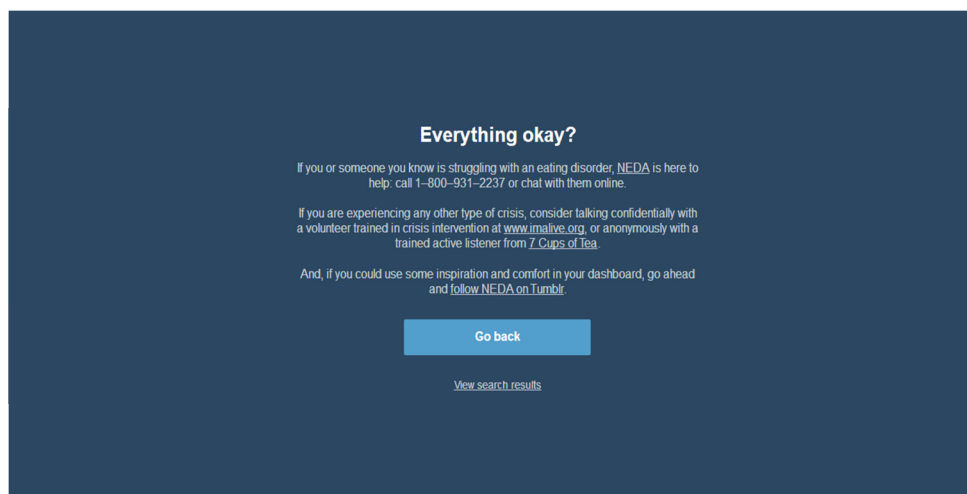


**Figure 3:** example of results from a search for #pro-ana on Instagram.



**Figure 4:** example of results from a search for #thinspo on Instagram.

In the world of Instagram, these words simply do not exist, but contrary to the platform's declaration that they will delete self-harm accounts, these terms generate user-account results, thus evidencing the challenges in censoring such content. Tumblr and Pinterest take a different approach to censorship: a search for pro-ana or thinspo on Tumblr generates a page which asks 'Everything okay?' (figure 5 below) and provides details of the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA). It does however at the bottom of the page give a link to 'view search results'. Even though Tumblr frames pro-ana content as problematic, it gives users the option to proceed, having duly presented support resources. Schott and Langan (2015, p.1171) however, are sceptical about the relationship between the NEDA and Tumblr, suggesting that the two organisations profit from such an association: the NEDA receives direct advertising, and Tumblr puts forth the appearance of protecting its users. Therefore, the relationship between controversial content and platforms such as Tumblr is not necessarily fraught with tension. As Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez Cruz (2015, p.89) note in their research into 'NSFW'<sup>23</sup> selfies on Tumblr, those who post the images may not have the same visual culture as the mainstream, but their images are nonetheless a commodity which contributes to the platform's profit.

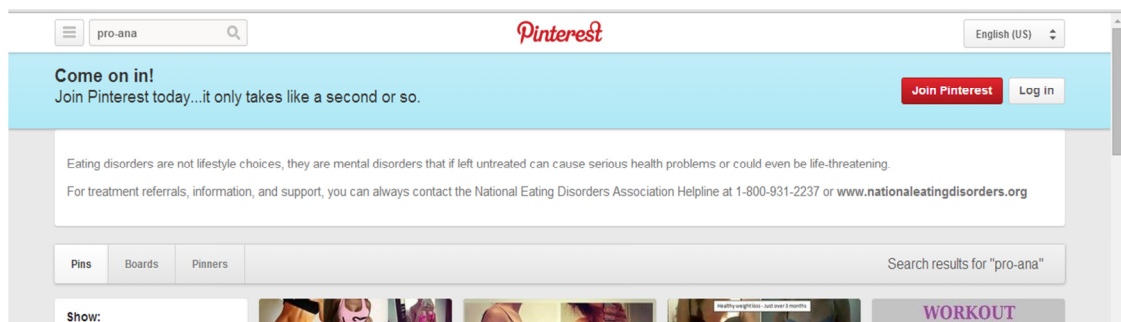


**Figure 5:** announcement arising from a search for 'pro-ana' or 'thinspo' on Tumblr.

<sup>23</sup> NSFW is the acronym for not safe for work, a tag which usually connotes nudity or violence.



Pinterest's warnings work similarly to those of Tumblr: It provides contact information for the National Centre for Eating Disorders<sup>24</sup> (see figure 6 below), advising users as follows: 'Eating disorders are not lifestyle choices, they are mental disorders that if left untreated can cause serious health problems or could even be life-threatening'. Pinterest's disclaimer focuses on denying pro-ana culture's claims to lifestyle choice and places anorexia in a paradigm of pathology, the same paradigm used by medicine, the media, and society at large. In what seems a contradictory move though, the page shows the results immediately without the need for further navigating, although the results generated for these hashtags are frozen and no longer update.



**Figure 6:** announcement arising from a search for 'pro-ana' (or 'thinspo') on Pinterest.

The architecture of Reddit differs from that of Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr. Reddit is a social networking site that divides areas of interest into sections called subreddits. Subreddits function similarly to hashtags as a way of organising content, and users may vote to increase or decrease the popularity of particular posts within a subreddit. My search engine queries gave rise to the popular subreddit, *thinspirationpics*. Although in order to access the subreddit, users have to confirm they are over the age of eighteen, it is publically available. A subreddit devoted to pro-ana exists, but it has a protected page telling the viewer: 'You must be a moderator or approved submitter to view its contents' (Reddit 2014); therefore, I did not investigate this space.

<sup>24</sup> It is pertinent to note here that all the public service announcements led to support organisations based in the USA. This appears to be the default message if one has not set up an account indicating location. If location is indicated in one's profile then the suggested support organisation is local.

It is illuminating that for Reddit, pro-ana is private, but thinspo is public, suggesting that the former should be hidden away but the latter should not. *thinspirationpics* is quick to deny any associations with pro-anorexia, firmly telling users: 'This is not a pro-ana subreddit. If you are caught posting this type of material it will be removed and you will be banned' (*thinspirationpics* 2014). With restrictions such as these in place pro-ana users have resorted to creative methods in order that their content appears on the platforms.

### **#thynspooo: circumventing censorship**

Having explored the modes through which Internet moderators execute censorship, in this section I focus on how pro-ana users are evading these attempts to suppress their spaces. As I pointed out earlier, the changes in pro-ana spaces comprise both a denial of pro-ana status and a disguising of pro-ana lexis. Because of censorship, the vocabulary of pro-ana has had to adapt in order to survive: users deploy enigmatic hashtags to evade deletion, as well as more innocuous hashtags which do not immediately appear to be of a pro-ana nature.

By creating and deploying obscure hashtags, users effectively exclude outsiders, parents, or those with censorial privilege, whilst simultaneously signalling to fellow pro-anas that such content can be found therein. Over time, such words gradually dissociate from their original roots to the extent that their meaning is disguised. For instance, the term 'bonespo' indicates images of bodies thin to the point their bones are revealed. Yet ostensibly this term, a portmanteau of the words bone and inspiration, the latter contracted to 'spo', does not immediately suggest pro-ana content. Through ellipsis and hybridising words, their original meanings are obfuscated and content is safeguarded, at least until it catches the attention of moderators and the chase starts anew.

The tactics deployed by pro-ana users are both creative and resistant and echo the offline linguistic strategies of other marginalised groups who seek to construct identities

which others perceive as controversial. For instance, in her study into the ludic activity of Moroccan immigrant children in Spain, Inmaculada M. García-Sánchez (2010) found that the children engaged in codeswitching in order to act out desired feminine identities disapproved of by their parents. By switching from Moroccan Arabic to Spanish, they were able to play with this identity without falling under the censure of caregivers. Thus, adopting different languages in particular contexts can be an empowering and subversive device.

Further, Boellstorff (2003) explores how creating new vocabularies allows subaltern groups to carve out their own identities. He shows how lesbian and gay Indonesians establish their subjectivities as *lesbi* and *gay*, as opposed to adopting already assigned Western or Indonesian terms (2003, emphasis in original). He nonetheless points out that, 'they cannot compose any script they please; their bricolage remains shaped by a discourse originating in the "West" and filtered through a nationalistic lens' (2003, p.237). Therefore, when marginalised groups appropriate language, they nonetheless remain beholden to its rules. By the same token, pro-ana users may subvert medical discourse, but they use its language to do so.

In spite of this, such tactics disrupt common-sense meanings and therefore contain radical potential. In her research into women's self-imaging practices on Instagram, Magdalena Olszanowski (2014, p.92) suggests that, 'recognizing the polysemic ontology of censorship while at the same time "playing" with it is one way to destabilize its repressive power'. Users' innovative flouting of the rules of social media sites can have the effect of undermining the authority of these platforms. Pro-ana users' circumvention of censorship, however, is also blurring boundaries: on the one hand they problematise what it means to be anorexic, but on the other they normalise it.

Pro-ana enthusiasts not only adopt coinages such as *bonespo* and *thinspo*, but also seemingly innocuous terms such as 'thin' and 'ana'. Figure 7 below depicts a post

produced by a search for #thin. In the post, the author describes her guilt over missing a workout. She then applies numerous hashtags, ranging from the banal: 'exercise', 'squats', 'weight', 'fitness', 'motivation', to the marginal: 'thynspooo', 'thigh\_gap', 'thynspiration'. The latter terms render pro-anorexic the pivotal hashtags she applies such as 'thin', 'slim', and 'fit'. Whilst this potentially risks censorship, it also reveals the fine line between normative dieting and anorexia, therefore demonstrating how language can be either legitimate or pathological depending upon context (cf. Ferreday 2003, p.285). In other words, such posts expose the extent to which so-called disordered body practices and everyday body disciplining are on a continuum.

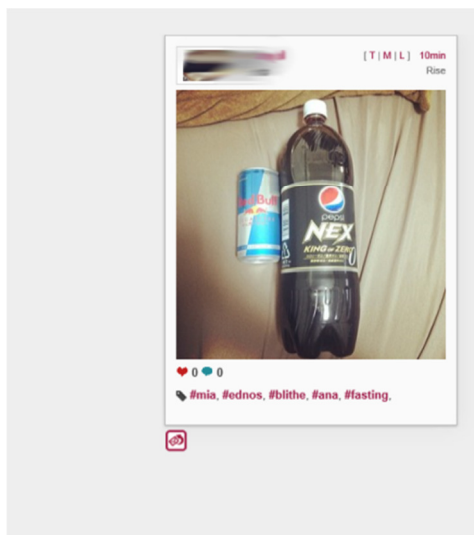


**Figure 7:** a post resulting from a search for #thin on Instagram.

With the hashtags 'pro-anorexia' and 'pro-ana' having been frozen out on many platforms, 'ana' in these spaces is often used to indicate pro-anorexic content, even though it is divorced from its prefix 'pro'. This may successfully elude those for whom it is not intended, but it also renders anorexic and pro-anorexic content one and the same. The material generated by the term ana is on the whole *pro-anorexic* in nature, in that it espouses thinness at any cost, but it does also include some recovery content. Figure 8 below arose from a #ana search and features a photograph of a plate of food and a series of hashtags indicating the poster's struggle to recover from anorexia. Recovery content can usually only be interpreted as such by the hashtags accompanying it, without which figure 8 could simply be the user displaying their



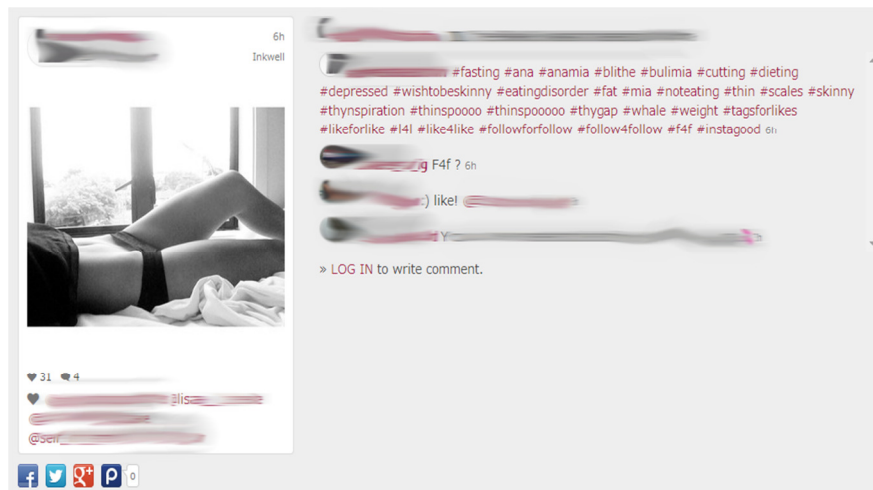
#ednos # blithe # fasting' 'anchor' the post to pro-ana rather than recovery as did figure eight. Nonetheless, anchoring here relies on the reader's understanding of pro-ana lexis. 'Blithe' in this context does not indicate carefree happiness, but a lack of concern, seemingly for one's well-being, as posts tagged with this word indicate they are about self-harm (see also Moreno et al 2016, p.80). This can be inferred by clicking the hyperlinked hashtag and seeing thousands of other posts which feature 'blithe' alongside hashtags referencing self-harm and images suggestive of self-harming behaviour, such as razor blades or photographs of emaciated bodies. Pro-ana users not only create their own lexis, they also alter the meanings of existing words, thereby contributing to the polysemy of language, as well as demonstrating a lack of regard for authority. The choice of the term 'blithe' is instructive as it implies a lack of concern not only for oneself, but also for the arbiters of meaning. Blithe is also effective because of its seeming innocuousness. Unlike terms such as 'cutting' or 'starve', its meaning is not immediately identifiable as 'harmful', therefore the images it accompanies can be hidden in plain sight.



**Figure 9:** a post resulting from a search for #ana on Instagram.

Even without censorship, the architecture of the social media discussed in this chapter is more conducive to diminishing the pro-ana voice than that of usenet groups and forums, for example. The latter spaces may favour discussion and the written word, but

the social media examined in this study does not encourage layers of conversation in the same way. danah boyd concedes that ‘networked publics’ affordances do not dictate participants’ behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement’ (2011, p.39). In the social media platforms examined in this thesis, the architecture encourages users to communicate in a symbolic form, rather than engage in lengthy discussions. For instance, they post images which other users may ‘like’ (Instagram), ‘reblog’ (Tumblr), ‘re-pin’ (Pinterest), or ‘upvote’ or ‘downvote’ (Reddit). Users can post comments and have discussions on all these platforms, but in the data examined, these tended to be minimal. Dialogue on Instagram in particular tends to be composed of hashtags as figure 10 below demonstrates.



**Figure 10:** a post resulting from a search for #thynspiration on Instagram.

The image portrays a slender woman in underwear and a cropped t-shirt. She is recumbent which emphasises a flat stomach and, with one leg raised slightly, she highlights the gap between her thighs. It is not clear if the image depicts the poster herself. The accompanying caption nonetheless suggests that the poster is unhappy: ‘I feel like I should never have been born’. The first commenter responds, ‘F4f?’, the abbreviated form of ‘follow for follow’ where a user suggests they will follow those who follow them in return. The second commenter simply confirms they like the original post

and the third and final commenter offers some solace to the original poster, telling her 'you were supposed to be born for beautiful reasons'. In the six hours since the post was made the user acquires numerous 'likes' but no substantial dialogue is established. The opportunity to comment then may present the appearance of interactivity and collaboration, but it is ultimately un-participatory (Dean 2005). Comments by their very nature do not necessarily require a response, and as Miller suggests they are 'phatic' (2008 p.398). In the platforms discussed, layers of comments accompany images without forming an actual discussion and at times they exist independently of one another.

The image-dominant nature of these platforms means that photographs and their attendant hashtags become a substitute for language. Aside from the caption in figure 10, the attendant hashtags, such as '#wishtobeskinny', '#cutting', and '#depressed' communicate that her unhappiness is because of her body. The hashtags bestow a set of meanings upon the image. Although Brooke Wendt proposes that 'when one reads an image's hashtags, it diverts one from discovering visual nuances since hashtags place all words and phrases on an equal level' (2014, p.33), I argue that hashtags, in a pro-ana setting at least, can provide further ambiguity and even complicate the meaning of an image. The tags, '#skinny' and '#thynspiration' as well as '#fat' and '#whale' leave to interpretation whether the individual in the photograph is being framed as thinspirational and therefore ideally thin, or overweight and in need of thinspiration. In these spaces, where the focus is on achieving immensely low body weight, it is more likely that the user is suggesting the latter. The current pro-ana landscape is image-heavy and text-light in such a way that its meanings are ambiguous. This serves its users well because, if it is unclear whether a post is promoting anorexia or endorsing caffeine drinks, then its content becomes more difficult to police.



By manipulating language in such a way, users are creating their own exclusive subcultural space.<sup>25</sup> In his seminal work on subcultures, Dick Hebdige (1991) argues that everyday objects, such as safety pins and Vaseline used by punks, can be appropriated by subordinate groups and furnished with new, secret meanings. However, he contends that once the mainstream incorporates a subcultural style, its radical claims are neutered. This neutering occurs within the context of pro-ana culture, where language, once appropriated by pro-ana culture, is now being re-appropriated for mainstream use. As Foucault argues, 'Discipline "makes" individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise' (1979, p.170). Consequently, pro-ana has become both object and instrument of linguistic manipulation as I will now explain.

### **'Sexy shots': eroticising the pro-anorexic body**

The previous section showed how pro-ana users manipulate language to evade censorship. In this section, I explore how the eroticising of the pro-anorexic body is contributing towards its normalisation. Anorexia has long been theorised as contradictory in that it simultaneously rejects a sexualised female body, yet conforms to hegemonic standards of femininity (Bordo 2003; Hesse-Biber 1996; Heywood 1996; Malson 2009; Turner 1996). By the same token, pro-ana online spaces have been conceived as both espousing female beauty ideals and critiquing their unattainability (Day and Keys, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Ferreday, 2003). However, the contemporary pro-ana online spaces examined in this thesis promote hegemonic beauty as a means of legitimising their texts. The bodies adorning these spaces are regularly in various stages of undress: in bikinis, workout clothing, or underwear. Characteristic of postfeminism, the women featured often adopt eroticised poses 'closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography' (Gill 2007b, p.258). In other words,

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<sup>25</sup> I use subculture here to describe a group which, as a result of holding beliefs which diverge from the wider culture, has sought to detach itself and establish its own.

these spaces have been increasingly co-opted by a postfeminist celebration of sexual freedom.

This is at its starkest in Reddit's negotiation of pro-ana culture in *thinspirationpics*, the subreddit devoted to thinspiration. This space is keen to create a separation not only between pro-ana and thinspo, but an even more arbitrary division between being thinspo and looking at thinspo: 'Not about *being* thinspo, but a commentary and gallery of the media used in thinspo, and the beauty and artistic nature inherent in those images' (emphasis added). This contradictory statement implies that an appreciation of thinspo is acceptable, provided it is on an aesthetic level. Reddit's interpretation of thinspo is illuminated when considered in the context of the gender demographics of the spaces examined in this study. Research undertaken by the Pew Research Center in 2012 suggests that Pinterest users are predominantly women, as are those on Instagram but to a lesser extent, whereas Tumblr is populated by almost the same number of men and women (Duggan and Brenner 2013). Reddit however is dominated by men (Duggan and Smith 2013). Hence, it is instructive that this space is more concerned with the notion of looking at thinspo than it is with 'being thinspo', entertaining as it does an implicitly heterosexual male audience.

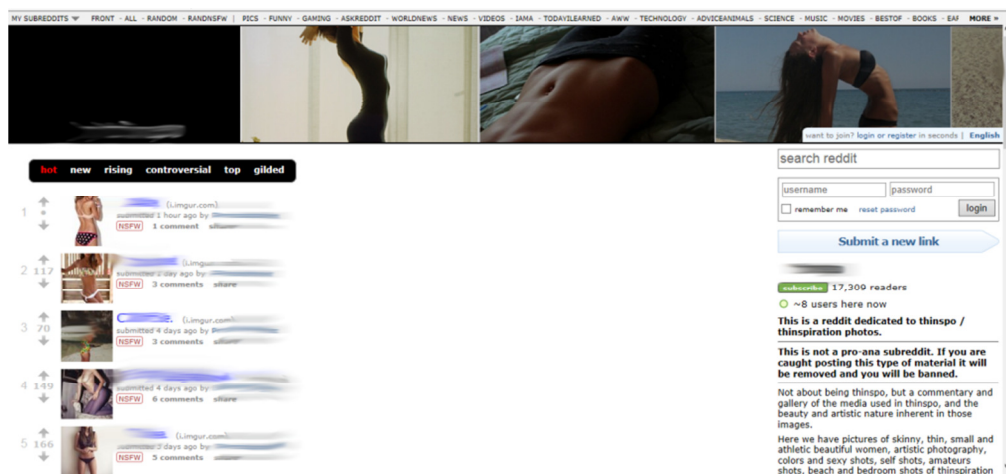
As such, *thinspirationpics* labours the rhetoric of beauty, fitness, and an appreciation of the female body:

Here we have pictures of skinny, thin, small and athletic beautiful women, artistic photography, colors and sexy shots, self shots, amateurs shots, beach and bedroom shots of thinspiration pics. Nude images are welcome if they fit within the ideas of the subreddit. That is the only real requirement, please keep it thinspirational (artistic, slim, beautiful). (2014)

Pro-ana is reframed through discourses of beauty and sensuality. As Foucault (1976) argues of sex and sexuality in 'The Repressive Hypothesis', it can only be discussed through language which has been subjected to censorship. By using adjectives such as 'sexy' and 'artistic', *thinspirationpics* repurposes the objectionable elements of extreme

thinness, thereby 'rendering it morally acceptable and technically useful' (Foucault 1976, p.21). Thinspo here is constructed as both acceptable and useful because it operates to shore up patriarchal understandings of the female body as an object to be admired and evaluated. As Bordo argues of the expressly female pathologies, anorexia and hysteria: 'one source of potential for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining the established order' (1989, p.22). Such disorders then, instead of enacting a protest against restrictive gender norms, ultimately come to support them.

Although *thinspirationpics* stresses the 'artistic' requirements of images submitted to the space, every post is tagged as 'NSFW'. The majority of images feature nude or partially nude women in eroticised poses with their faces obscured. They consequently adopt what Attwood terms 'Porn style' (2009, xiv), a look which originates from porn but has now become mainstream. As Gill (2009, p.94) argues, today, 'arched backs, exposed breasts and simulated orgasms are so routine as to rarely provoke comment'. The women of *thinspirationpics* espouse such a look, as the landing page illustrates (see figure, 11 below). This space therefore epitomises Winch's (2013) postfeminist girlfriend gaze: rather than being passive receivers of the male gaze, the women here actively exhibit their bodies. In postfeminism, women are not only expected to submit to an impossible ideal of femininity, they must also be complicit in it (Gill 2007a).



**Figure 11:** an example of the landing page of *thinspirationpics*, the subreddit dedicated to thinspiration.

Posts in *thinspirationpics* range from images of models and celebrities, reposts from other subreddits which users have deemed thinspo-worthy, through to selfies seeking feedback and validation. In line with the social media sites examined, users of *thinspirationpics* do not engage in substantial dialogue with one another, rather they post phatic statements praising or deriding women's bodies. For example, one user starts a discussion thread where she tells her observers: 'Everyone tells me to gain weight, perhaps you guys will appreciate me as I am' ('what do you guys think?' 2014). This prompts supportive comments such as 'You're perfect. You just remind them they failed' (ibid.). The suggestion here is that this user embodies the perfection her (implicitly female) peers are lacking. Such dialogue reflects the way in which postfeminist empowerment is 'tied to possession of a slim and alluring young body, whose power is the ability to attract male attention and sometimes female envy' (Gill 2009, p.103). This Reddit user is reassured repeatedly by commenters that she has such power. Reassurances either focus on her capacity to thinspire: 'jealous! you're my new motivation', or her sexual desirability: 'My god, I would treat you like a princess and fuck you like a slut' ('what do you guys think?' 2014). In its aggressive appreciation of the original poster's body, the latter comment demonstrates the extent to which thinspiration spaces have become centred on conforming to heteronormative ideals, rather than any form of protest.

The images in *thinspirationpics* serve not only as thinspiration, but as a form of erotic titillation. A male user posts an image of a model, captioning it, 'Wow'. The woman pictured has a visible ribcage, and unusually for a woman so thin, full breasts. This prompts comments such as: 'She is thin and has big boobies. The best of both worlds [...] Doesn't get better than this' ('Wow' 2014). The use of the term 'boobies' is illuminating: a slang term for women's breasts, it connotes a classed perception of femininity, and one that is at odds with the middle-class, almost androgynous image of

the anorectic.<sup>26</sup> The synthesis of emaciation and womanly curves here is symbolic of the co-opting of the anorexic body by postfeminism. As Stephanie Genz argues, the new postfeminist woman (PFW) can be defined by her desire to ‘have it all’:

[she] navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship. She inhabits a nondualistic space that holds together these varied and often oppositional stances and thus, she provides multiple opportunities for female identification. (2010, p.98)

The trope of ‘having it all’ is epitomised by the woman whose ribs are jutting but breasts are full. She demonstrates mastery over her female body, as indicated by the visible ribcage, but, at the same time, she maintains an archetypal femaleness as signified by her breasts. The pro-ana subject then, comes to embody the contradictory requirements of twenty-first century femininity.

### **‘HEALTHY THINSPO’ and the marketisation of pro-ana**

If, in the last section, I explored how pro-ana spaces adopt discourses of beauty and sensuality in order to remain online, in this section I focus on the reappropriation of that same language by the mainstream and the impact this is having on contemporary pro-ana culture. As I suggested above, for Hebdige (1991) subcultures are always susceptible to incorporation by the mainstream. He describes two modes of incorporation:

- 1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);
  - 2) the “labelling” and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form).
- (Hebdige 1991, p.94)

Both modes are taking place in pro-ana culture: it has been subject to commodification by the diet industry (via pro-ana marketing sites for instance) and, it is being re-defined by the media (as the *Reveal* article at the beginning of this chapter shows).

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Aimee Liu’s ([1979] 2000) account of living with anorexia where she describes her desire to ‘eliminate [her breasts] cut them off if need be, to become as flat-chested as a child again’ (p.79).

The marketing sites yielded as a result of search engine queries for 'pro-ana' and 'thinspo' illustrate the stealthy re-appropriation of pro-ana rhetoric and discourses by the diet industry. Even user-led site, *A1 Thinspo* has a section which appears to be marketing. It advertises a graded membership plan, and although it does not make clear what membership entails, users receive 'free' weight-loss supplements ranging from appetite suppressing lollypops to fat-burning pills ('Membership' 2014). Other sites such as *30 Days to Thin*, *Pro Ana Tips*, *Prothinspiration Diet*, and *Thinspiration Pro Ana Tips*, advertise weight-loss programmes requiring the purchase of guidebooks. These spaces all draw on 'testimonials' from young women who describe a life of loneliness and misery before this book and its diet guidance provided them with salvation.

A testimonial on *Thinspiration Pro Ana Tips* features a young woman called Jenny describing the bullying she experienced as a result of being fat: 'when I entered college, and heard someone say "fatty Jenny" pointing at me one day and then the next day, I heard someone say "rolly Jenny", followed by "humpty Jenny"' (2014). Likewise, the author of the book *30 Days to Thin: Get the Body you Deserve*, claims she used to weigh over 200 lbs. adding 'There is no other way to describe this period of my life than absolutely horrible. I did not have any friends and I went straight home after school' (Prothinspiration Diet 2014). As well as suggesting that the individual is wholly responsible for their body size, these spaces elide a 'fat' body with social exclusion, implying that, 'a fat person's only shot at citizenship comes if he or she gratefully consumes the panoply of diet and fitness products made available by industry and government' (LeBesco 2004, p.57). In each of these examples, the women find social approval after successfully following the '30 Days Thin' diet plan, thus underlining that thinness 'promises the rewards of cultural acceptance' (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p.68). These spaces therefore have the explicit aim of selling weight-loss products under the guise of pro-ana.

The current neoliberal climate '[assumes] that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade' (Harvey 2005, p.7). By this logic new markets must always be exploited, even if this amounts to targeting eating disordered individuals. Despite this, the mainstream media does not seek to differentiate between 'pro-ana' spaces which have been co-opted by marketing and those which may offer genuine support. An article in *The Huffington Post* incites panic over pro-ana sites purportedly selling merchandise such as bracelets and appetite suppressants (Sherriff 2014). One of the spaces it references is the now deleted *Tangerine Monday* which the journalist defines as a pro-ana site. Although this site adopts the lexis of pro-ana and describes itself as a 'Weight Loss Anorexia Tips and Blog', it centres wholly on the promotion of a weight-loss drug, offering free samples and asking for customers' credit card details (Tangerine Monday 2014). These 'pro-ana' spaces have emerged to capitalise on the phenomenon and this is also perpetuating its vilification.

Whilst pro-ana rhetoric has entered the mainstream, pro-ana users are disguising their spaces as weight-loss motivation blogs and drawing on discourses of health to legitimise them. In so doing they reinforce spurious cultural understandings that good health can only be achieved through weight loss (Cogan 1999, p.246; see also Malson 2008, p.35). By conflating healthy eating with losing weight and vice versa, thinness comes to be equated with healthiness, and in turn, fatness becomes synonymous with being 'sloppy, careless, and self-indulgent' (Hartley 2001, p.65). This is particularly prevalent in the individual blogs which were indexed on the first pages of my search engine queries. The blogs vary in the ways they repudiate pro-ana: from statements of denial, through to interspersing images of bony torsos with healthy recipe ideas and exercise plans. The women featured in these spaces have, without exception, long flowing hair, they are predominantly white, often tanned, and where their faces are shown they wear makeup. In other words these spaces pay homage to normative femininity.

All the blogs examined feature the term *thinspo* in either their blog title or tagline, a number of which also have disclaimers which renounce pro-anorexia. They reference health and self-improvement and reinforce the notion that a slim, attractive body is 'a healthy, normal body' (Lupton 1996, p.137; see also Malson 2008). This functions, albeit unwittingly, to legitimise pro-ana online spaces. Hence, the blog, *Land of Skinny* is replete with images of thin and semi-naked women on beaches, by swimming pools, or mid-workout in the gym. They are depicted actively manicuring their bodies and such images are interspersed with others of nutritious salads and plates of fruit. This, however, is at odds with the diet advised by the blogger which is mainly composed of water, eggs and celery, thereby suggesting that the images of healthy, active women consuming wholesome foods are misleading. Put simply, this blog is not about health, but thinness, and the meagre diet it advises reinforces that a thin body is 'an indicator of health and beauty/femininity, regardless of what means are used to secure or maintain it' (Parsons 2015, p.111).

Despite this, at the top of the *Land of Skinny's* homepage is the statement: 'Disclaimer: This is a healthy thinspo blog. I do not support eating disorders. I want to help and motivate people to lose weight in a healthy way' (2014). Denial of pro-ana is enacted by the repetition of the adjective 'healthy' which serves to pre-empt accusations of the damaging behaviour associated with eating disorders, and 'motivate' furnishes the blogs with a sense of activity and enthusiasm, at odds with the apparent passive misery of anorexia. The author then passionately adds, 'I'm obsessed with losing weight. On this blog I post things that motivate and inspire me, and I hope I can motivate you as well' (*Land of Skinny* 2014). The upbeat tone and depiction of weight loss as a positive development is echoed by *Heartthinspo* which describes itself as 'a healthy thinspiration blog as well as a progress one [...] here to help motivate you and keep you healthy and thin with tips, photos and recipes' (2014). The reference to 'progress' operates to preclude the possibility that this blog is fostering dangerous



practices, or that its author is retreating to disordered eating, instead it claims to endorse health and motivation.

Such discourses echo what Maxine Woolhouse et al (2011) found in their research into young women's talk around food: neoliberal rhetoric around choice is deployed to construct weight-loss practices as normal, healthy eating. Consequently, when the author of *Howtothinspo* is reprimanded by a poster claiming to be a mother whose daughter has become addicted to thinspo sites, she replies: 'I'm sorry that your daughter has an addiction but all I'm promoting is going to the gym and eating healthily. I don't see any harm in that' (2014). Her riposte bears a striking resemblance to that of *Reveal* at the start of this chapter. By situating thinspo within neoliberal discourses of health, these texts, both online and offline, justify their claims and thinspo is reframed as a normal, healthy practice and an informed choice.<sup>27</sup>

Pro-ana culture adopts the 'apparently neutral' vocabulary espoused by postfeminism and neoliberalism (Wilkes 2015, p.30) and this operates to legitimise it. These spaces cheerfully tell their viewers that giving up is not an option with reminders such as: 'if you want it you gotta work for it!' (*Workingforthin* 2014) and 'Sore or sorry. You pick' (*Howtothinspo* 2014). However, the current pro-ana landscape is contradictory and at times its users appear confused about whether they are pro-ana or not. This is demonstrated by one blogger who describes herself as 'Ana, Mia, and addicted to thinspo', yet adds immediately after, 'This is *not* pro-ana' (*Sunshine Thinspiration* 2014). She self-identifies as anorexic and bulimic with an addiction to thinspo, whilst simultaneously denying that her blog is pro-ana. This may be indicative of her struggle for recovery, but it also shows the extent to which the path to successful femininity is loaded with contradictions that impede a young woman's sense of identity (Budgeon

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<sup>27</sup> See also Barry Adam's (2005) research on the appropriation of neoliberal ideology in bareback culture. Adam found that the reproduction of neoliberal discourse in bareback culture resulted in 'a platform for constructing unprotected sex as a "responsible" choice among adult men' (2005, p.343).

2011, p.289). Western culture tells her she must be thin, but she must also look healthy. As a consequence, such bloggers, perhaps inadvertently, seek to create a distinction between pro-ana and thinspo as a means of defending their desire to be thin. This has the effect of pathologising pro-ana and framing thinspo as acceptable, as *Reveal* magazine do in their statement defending their use of the term.

'Healthy thinspo' has also given rise to the coinage, 'fitspo', a portmanteau of fit and thinspiration. The aim of fitspo is to inspire individuals to focus on fitness, rather than thinness, through images, recipes and exercise advice. However, users often combine #thinspo and #fitspo in posts and blogs, implying that there is little difference between the two. Indeed, research has shown that fitspo content often leads users to thinspo content (Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015) and that the two adopt similar discourses (Boepple and Thompson 2016) which can negatively impact upon body image (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016; Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015). Yet, in the mainstream, fitspo persists as the healthy form of thinspiration, and in a bizarre turn *The Huffington Post* which has criticised pro-ana so vehemently and even featured an article drawing on Tiggemann and Zaccardo's research to criticise fitspo culture (Adams 2015), now has a section on its website devoted to it. 'HuffPost Fitspiration' provides not only weight loss and exercise guidance, it also draws on fitness inspiration which it takes directly from Instagram (HuffPost Fitspiration 2016); ironically profiting from that which it criticises. The media's appropriation of fitspo and thinspo therefore demonstrates what Hebdige describes as the 're-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups' (1991, p.94).

It seems that fitspo is afforded more legitimacy than thinspo, even though the difference between the two is merely nominal. The blog, *Workingforthin* describes itself as both 'fitspo & thinspo' (2014). The author tells her 'story', describing it as one of an obsession with weight loss which led to disordered eating, however she declares that

she has now regained control and her UGW (ultimate goal weight)<sup>28</sup> is not numeric but, 'healthy happy and fit' (ibid.). Nonetheless her numerical goal weights state her desire to be just over eight stone, and as the previous chapter on women's magazines argues, the women's UK dress size eight, eight stone body is presented as both aspirational, but acceptable. Aiming for 'eight' denotes the appropriate amount of body disciplining without apparently being pathological. The author of *Workingforthin* differentiates between an eating disordered past and one which is healthy and composed of thinspo and fitspo which she groups together, suggesting that they are a positive alternative to disordered eating. Consequently, thinspo and fitspo represent a compromise between disordered body practices and everyday disciplining, and in this liminal space they are afforded the legitimacy pro-ana lacks. Blogs such as *Workingforthin* draw upon postfeminist neoliberal rhetoric in order to deny that their content is pro-anorexic, and in turn they suggest it is simply about motivating people to lose weight healthily. However, these discourses of denial and disguise are blurring the boundaries between what is anorexic, pro-anorexic, thinspo, or fitspo, which results in such content being more pervasive than ever. Hidden in plain sight, pro-ana online spaces have not disappeared, instead they have been normalised.

### **Conclusion: normalising pro-ana**

In this chapter I critically examined how pro-ana online culture has changed over the past decade, moving from a communicative discussion-based phenomenon, to one which is image-led and individualised. I have argued that this is both a consequence of censorship and the developments in social media architecture which facilitates phatic expression more than it does discursive communication. I contend that these developments in pro-ana online spaces reflect the current postfeminist neoliberal

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<sup>28</sup> Acronyms such as UGW (ultimate goal weight), GW (goal weight- often listed as GW1, GW2, as the user tracks their falling weight), SW (starting weight), CW (current weight), and LW (lowest weight), appear throughout pro-ana online spaces. Users insert these various weights on their signatures in forum or social media posts, or as a tagline in a blog for example.

climate which shifts the focus from the community to the individual and encourages women to engage in an unending project of self-improvement.

I demonstrated how the methodological challenges I encountered during this project, from ethical issues to elusive data, highlight the misconceptions surrounding the pro-ana phenomenon and emphasise the urgent need to research this area. The phenomenon has always been steeped in contradictions, but the former landscape was at least easy to identify with its prayers to Ana and warnings that the viewer would see content in support of maintaining anorexia. By collating mainstream weight-loss advice and photographs of skinny celebrities, the pro-ana phenomenon holds the potential to critique the oppressive culture of compulsory thinness. The act of labelling such advice and images as pro-anorexic or thinspirational raises important questions about how 'healthy' and 'normal' it is to be, for example, constantly suppressing one's appetite in the hope of achieving a celebrity body.

However, as I showed in my analysis of the contemporary pro-ana landscape, users are denying that their spaces are pro-ana and drawing on the rhetoric of health and beauty to disguise the dangers of following such a lifestyle. This may allow their texts remain online, but it also means that the possibility for critique is thwarted. With its motivational platitudes and erotic shots, contemporary pro-ana culture demonstrates 'one way in which potential resistance is not merely undercut, but *utilized* in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations' (Bordo 1989, p.15; emphasis in original). I am not suggesting that the pro-ana spaces of old were harmless, nor am I refuting the positive effects of healthy eating and regular exercise. What I am contesting is the extent to which these practices contribute towards the perpetuation of oppressive cultural norms.

Ironically, pro-ana online spaces, which have been met with such outrage and demands for censorship, have been co-opted by those who sought to critique them. At the same time, these spaces disguise themselves with the language of their censors,

and as a result, they have become unwitting handmaidens to postfeminist neoliberalism. The increasing focus on images and corresponding decrease in words has blurred the boundaries between what is pro-anorexic and what is 'normal' weight loss; what constitutes an anorexic body and what is 'sexy' and 'slim', to borrow the lexis of *thinspirationpics*. Indeed, were they not accompanied by the term thinspo many images would not be identifiable as such. Thus, censoring such spaces as many social media platforms do, calls that they improve their Content Advisory warnings (Moreno et al 2016, p.83) and recommendations that media literacy programmes warn users about social network media (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015, p.66) are futile. This ignores the fact that these spaces, whether they are pro-ana, fitspo, or healthy weight-loss blogs, are firmly located in a culture which equates a slim body with being healthy and normal (Lupton 1996). And *Reveal* magazine's appropriation of thinspiration is tacit recognition of the pervasiveness of compulsory thinness in Western culture.

This chapter has argued that pro-ana online is both a product and an enabler of normalising discourses. Moreover, its focus on individual choice and empowerment disregards social structures, suggesting that anyone can be thinspirational if they work hard enough. In the next chapter I explore this in detail, arguing of the way in which the postfeminist neoliberal politics of these spaces obscure and shore up intersectional marginalisation.

## **Chapter 4: Intersectional privilege in pro-ana online spaces**

### **Introduction**

In the last chapter I mapped out the changing spaces of pro-ana online, arguing that censorship and media vilification – twinned with continuing discourses of hegemonic femininity and postfeminism – have led to certain aspects of the pro-ana phenomenon being mainstreamed and others being marginalised. Users of these spaces draw upon narratives of postfeminism and neoliberalism in order to legitimise the pro-ana self and this is contributing towards its normalisation. In this chapter, I take a more focussed look at the production of the thin ideal in pro-ana online spaces. To do so, I explore the phenomenon through the paradigm of intersectionality.

The stereotypical image of the anorexic as a young, white, Western, middle-class female striving for perfection has long been refuted by scholars of cultural studies (Bordo 2009, pp. 48-49; Malson and Burns 2009; Nasser and Malson, 2009; Saukko 2009). However, in the data interrogated such an image remains central to pro-ana enthusiasts (see also Holmes 2015, p.107). The spaces examined reinforce white heterofemininity, collating as they do hegemonic representations of thinness and drawing upon contemporary discourses of weight loss. My argument is not that anorexia is borne out of young women's uncritical consumption of media images of thin bodies (Malson 2009, p.143). Rather, I suggest that pro-ana online spaces appropriate such discourses for their own ends and in so doing reveal the extent to which the culture of compulsory thinness operates around privileged social categories.

In this chapter, I argue that pro-ana online spaces reinforce white, middle-class heterofemininity as the norm. I suggest that they do this in two ways: firstly, by venerating bodies which resonate with those idealised in mainstream culture and secondly, by repudiating those who do not fulfil such bodily ideals. The result of this is

a self-interested individual who perpetuates the image of the anorectic as one who occupies or aspires to intersections of privilege. This is not to say that every pro-ana user is a white, middle-class heterofeminine teen, but that many users discursively produce themselves as such. The pro-ana subject is not homogeneous and as this chapter will show, at times she optimistically embraces life with a love of raw food and exercise, at others she is a self-hating advocate of grunge, or a cynical hipster. Consequently, I argue that this ostensibly marginalised space is shoring up intersections of privilege.

### **A note on structure**

This chapter is divided into thematic sections rather than by race, class, and gender for example. As Davis argues, intersectionality done properly should be ‘a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated’ (2008 p.79). With this in mind, I approach my data thematically in order to better understand the pro-ana online phenomenon and what this tells us about the ‘complicated and contradictory’ culture of compulsory thinness.

I begin the chapter discussing the key literature on intersectionality, with a particular focus on the ways in which it is co-opted. I then turn to my data which I analyse in four thematic sections. The first section attends to the aesthetics of the pro-ana body and explores how certain bodies are repudiated or othered by pro-ana users. In the second section, I interrogate the way food in these spaces constructs a privileged self. The third section looks at compulsory heterosexuality and users’ negotiations of an upbeat form of normative femininity which cajoles the user into manicuring her body. The fourth section of this chapter examines the alternative to the upbeat pro-ana enthusiast: the self-hating proponent of grunge. I suggest that both these forms of pro-ana identity are underpinned by neoliberal understandings of self-hood which do not sit well with intersectionality.

## Intersectionality

For Pierre Bourdieu, 'the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste' (1984, p.190). He suggests that social class emanates through the presentation and treatment of the body, from the clothes we wear, to the food we eat. Bourdieu's theories are a valuable starting point for a study of the body but, as Skeggs (2004b) points out, his lack of attention towards gender means they fall short.<sup>29</sup> Instead, she takes a more intersectional approach, building on Bourdieu's interrogation of class to suggest that 'bodies are the physical sites where the relations of class, gender, race, sexuality and age come together and are embodied and practised' (1997, p.82). According to Skeggs, the body manifests (and also seeks to mask)<sup>30</sup> a set of identities which overlap with one another. As such, Jasbir Puar argues that 'identities cannot so easily be cleaved' (2014, p.337). Therefore, it would be false to claim, for instance, that one is only constituted by one's class, to suggest that race does not play a part in it. On the contrary, class is raced and race is classed. Individuals are therefore constituted by intersecting social categories which can only be separated artificially, and it is for this reason that an intersectional approach to a study of the body is essential.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to tackle the need to address the multiple categories which result in the oppression of an individual or group. Originally, she deployed the concept to expose the invisibility of black women under the law, using these intersections of marginalisation as a springboard for further analysis (Crenshaw 1989, p.40). Crucially, the multiple ways in which an individual or group is oppressed may not be immediately obvious. It is an intersectional approach which illuminates the terms of marginalisation. It critiques any notion that oppression is singular. For example, rather than viewing racism and sexism as parallel to one

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<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Skeggs argues that Bourdieu's traditional approach to gender ultimately means that his 'analysis is performative of the categories it seeks to critique (2004b, p.27).

<sup>30</sup> In Skeggs' research, her interviewees communicated class through what she terms 'disidentification': they revealed that they were working class, through 'their multitudinous efforts *not to be* recognized as working class' (1997, p.74, emphasis in original).



another it conceives them as intersecting social categories (Grzanka 2014, p.xv). Theorists have applauded the ambiguity of intersectional theory (Davis 2008; Lykke 2010). Davis, in particular, argues that ‘paradoxically, precisely the vagueness and open-endedness of ‘intersectionality’ may be the very secret to its success’ (2008, p.69). Intersectionality must not privilege any social category (Carbado 2013; Villa 2013) and one should avoid doing away with identities which do not fit in to the main categories, barring them with ‘the kind of magical “etcetera”’ (Villa 2011, p.177).

However, the concept has not passed without criticism. Jennifer C. Nash suggests that it fails to address the way in which oppression and privilege traverse one another (2008, pp. 11-12) and Paula-Irene Villa argues that ‘on the level of embodiment, intersectionality is only partly helpful’ (2011, p.183). Other critics have called for identities to be examined more collectively, as coalitions (Carastathis 2013) or assemblages (Puar 2014). Barbara Tomlinson, however, points out that scholars are hasty to critique intersectionality in their rush to publish, and that they may ‘exaggerate criticisms to draw on the prestige of the appearance of novelty and innovation in ways that are destructive rather than constructive and competitive rather than contributive’ (2013, p.997). If intersectionality is being critiqued merely in a quest for personal achievement, then a grave concern is its depoliticising by neoliberalism (Mohanty 2013; Tomlinson 2013, p.999), as well as its co-opting by white feminism (Bilge 2013).

Importantly, this chapter does not seek to disavow or obscure the specifically racial history of intersectionality, or to co-opt it in order to make sense of white women’s experiences. Instead, it employs intersectionality to expose the privileging of white, middle-class heterofemininity. I argue that the neoliberal logic of pro-ana culture obscures the extent to which the ideal body is situated at a privileged intersection of race, class and gender, amongst other identities. By approaching these spaces from an intersectional standpoint I interrogate how the seeming neutrality of postfeminist

neoliberalism renders 'the privileged white female an ally of the neoliberal project' (Wilkes 2015, p.30).

### **'Black thinspiration' and 'Jenner genes': situating the ideal body in pro-ana online spaces**

It is only relatively recently that whiteness has come to be studied in terms of race, and race as a category, like gender and class, is socially constructed (Dyer 1997). Gilman (1985) articulates the construction of whiteness as a privileged social category by showing how scientific thought sought to render black people inferior and in turn shore up whiteness. He says: 'If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan' (Gilman 1985, p.216). Crucial to Gilman's argument is that the genitalia under examination were predominantly those of women. His analysis therefore demonstrates the way in which black femininity has come to be repudiated through the elision of racial and sexual difference which secures hegemonic whiteness (see also Shaw 2005).

Across the sites, forums, and image boards examined in this study, users assert the centrality of white femininity. The bodies in these spaces may be [fake] tanned, but they are predominantly white, suggesting firstly, the non-white body, by its very absence is not thinspirational, and secondly, anorexia is only a concern for white women. Nonetheless, the white body here is not deliberately pervasive, rather it prevails because, as Richard Dyer argues in his theory of whiteness: 'it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal' (1997, p.10). As a result, references to bodies which are not white, but are deemed thinspirational, are marked.

This is particularly prominent in the site, *A1 Thinspo*. This site is vast and sprawling and it appears to cover any type of thinspo one may desire, from categories on individually named celebrities, through to 'ballet thinspo', 'YouTube thinspiration' (*A1*

*Thinspo* 2014), and pertinent to this discussion, sections devoted to thinspiration based on ethnicity. 'Black', 'Asian', and 'Latina' thinspiration (ibid.) ensures that such bodies come to be wholly represented by their race. This fetishising of the non-white body echoes that of online porn spaces; sites such as PornHub offer a number of categories based on race and ethnicity, including (and not limited to) 'Asian'; 'Interracial'; 'Japanese'; 'Latina' (2014). Hence, non-white porn has to be specifically selected, as does non-white thinspiration. Therefore, non-white ethnicity in pro-ana spaces is exoticised; it 'becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (hooks 1992, p.366). What is more, whilst a number of the sub-links on *A1 Thinspo* for Black, Asian and Latina thinspo were broken, those still functioning provided only catwalk model and magazine images of non-white women, thus tacitly suggesting that the thinspirational non-white woman is an exception.

The most disturbing section of *A1 Thinspo*, however, is its invocation of the Holocaust: flanked by links to images of models is a link entitled, 'Concentration Camp Chic'. The suffixing of 'chic' to a term not typically associated with elegance or style intertextually echoes the 1990s 'heroin chic' phenomenon whereby images of pale, emaciated bodies in the throes of drug-addiction became fashionable. Rebecca Arnold (2001, p.52) argues that 'heroin chic' destabilises our desire to see images of an ideal self for instead we are 'given only images of human frailty, which is profoundly jarring and unsettling'. The invoking of 'Concentration Camp' chic in *A1 Thinspo* works in the same way, indeed it almost mocks the viewer, suggesting that if they really want to see images of severely emaciated individuals, they should look to the Holocaust.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this link no longer works, and instead it directs the viewer to the preceding link. Nonetheless, that such a link once existed, and that images of persecuted individuals in concentration camps could be deemed thinspirational, suggests the extent to which context is disregarded in the pursuit for thinness. Such indifference to cultural context is an archetypal trait of the self-serving postmodern

subject who is so entrenched in constructing themselves as a 'work of art' that they fall short of showing due diligence to the cultural objects they plunder (Kinzey 2012; McGee 2005). Clearly the Holocaust has been utilised here for thinspiration because of the correlation between the bodies of individuals in the final stages of anorexia and the extreme states of emaciation concentration camp victims were forced to endure. However, this parallel runs deeper: pro-ana online spaces venerate a white, slender body which is closely tied to depictions of the blonde, blue-eyed Aryan figure described by Dyer (1997, p.118). Specifically, Michelle Lelwica, Emma Hoglund, and Jenna McNallie argue that pro-ana websites represent an extreme version of the obsession with the thin body, an ideal which is 'constructed through and associated with racial-class-cultural privilege' (2009, p.22). By drawing on inspiration from the Holocaust, pro-ana users, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrate that implicit in perfect thinness is whiteness and thus a repudiation of bodies which do not fulfil this ideal.

The spaces examined in this study echo the castigation of the fat body which takes place in the magazines explored in chapter two of this thesis. However, it manifests such criticism in more extreme language. For instance, a number of spaces utilise the fat body as motivation not to eat: *Guide to Ana* states that 'Only fat girls get cravings...fat girls are weak. Do YOU want to be a fat girl?' (2010), and *Ethereal Anas* advises 'Slap your body fat and watch it wobble [...] Look at fat people' (2009). Being fat is conflated with a lack of self-control, the result of '[giving] in to cravings' and it is even presented as deserving of sadistic slapping. Fat in these spaces is a crime to be punished (see also Day and Keys 2008b, p.90), and as a result, it is constantly policed.

Such policing is glaring in *Skinny Gossip*.<sup>31</sup> This website and forum is run by an anonymous blogger who calls herself Skinny Gurl. As I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, it is not ostensibly a pro-ana space; in fact this is something it vehemently denies, even though it draws on pro-ana discourses. With its rolling images of

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<sup>31</sup> An extended version of the analysis of *Skinny Gossip* appears in Cobb (2016b).

celebrities and models, *Skinny Gossip*'s homepage borrows its presentation and rhetoric from the celebrity gossip magazine in its jokey, tabloid style (McRobbie 1997). This is ironic, considering the forum discussions disparage anything they consider lower class. However, the light-hearted register of the website masks the darker tone which pervades the forum conversations beneath. On the homepage, Skinny Gurl exclaims: 'Barbara Palvin- Busted! Is lovely Barbara packing on the pounds?' (2015). The adjective 'lovely' is instructive here: it denotes a specific kind of beauty, one that is both feminine and middle-class, which I discuss in detail below. By speculating that the model may have gained weight, the author suggests that this loveliness may have escaped her.

Skinny Gurl explains that she established the site so that thin women could come together without fear of judgment and being told they must eat (2012a). She rages:

It also seems thin is only OK if it's an accident. We hear thin celebrities say "*damn, I eat like a horse and I just can't gain weight!*" This is a lie and one they feel they must tell, because honesty ("*I work hard for this body!*") is for some reason socially unpalatable. It's also terrible because it feeds the delusion that our body weight is outside of our control. (Ibid., emphasis in original)

Whilst the author does not acknowledge the privileges associated with thinness, she claims that she is seeking to expose the hard work that goes in to achieving it. This statement therefore reads as an affront to the denial of dieting enacted by the women's magazines examined in chapter two. Skinny Gurl reasons that celebrities obscure the truth about their bodies, yet she uses the neoliberal logic of self-improvement to suggest that through hard work anyone can achieve the ideal body. In so doing, she indirectly implicates fat people as deliberately lacking the self-discipline and moral worth to lose weight (Bordo 2003, p.192; LeBesco 2004, p.55). The tone of *Skinny Gossip* is thus set: a defensive and blinkered space, indifferent to the intersectional inequalities which might render a person unable (and unwilling) to realise a slender body.

The website received mainstream press attention in 2012 for its shaming of American model and actress Kate Upton whom *Skinny Gurl* called 'well-marbled' (2012b). The connotations of fatty meat here are intended not only to reference the burgers Upton was promoting at the time, but her apparently corpulent body. Ironically, given their widely-documented misogyny and insistence upon judging women on their appearance, the *Mail Online* described the site's comments about Upton as 'ridiculous' (McCormack 2012), and *The Sun* declared it 'a foul tirade of abuse' (The Sun 2012). In the now infamous article, *Skinny Gurl* labels Upton 'thick, vulgar, almost *pornographic*' and takes issue with her apparent lack of class, insinuating that she buys her clothes from discount store, Wal-Mart (2012, emphasis in original). Upton is portrayed by *Skinny Gurl* as antithetical to Skeggs' evaluation of a respectable female body which is 'usually middle-class' (1997, p.82).

*Skinny Gossip* is not only exclusive in the female bodies it admires, but also in its membership. Those who wish to join the site and take part in discussions must email *Skinny Gurl* with their vital statistics, including Body Mass Index and photographic evidence of their size. If a candidate is not considered thin enough, they are rejected. Accordingly, *Skinny Gossip's* Tumblr page abounds with queries from potential members eager to be accepted into the site. A typical post asks if *Skinny Gurl* would allow an individual with a high Body Mass Index to join, a standard reply is in the negative (skinnigossip 2015). An interested party asks directly about ethnic requirements, having previously inferred that being a person of colour is a hindrance to membership; *Skinny Gurl* is perhaps deliberately vague in her response, suggesting that the user follow the application process and they will find out that way (ibid.). Although the site does not state directly that only white women need apply, the images of models and celebrities and members' avatars clearly indicate that whiteness is a pre-requisite.

The *Skinny Gossip* forum features a section devoted to discussing the merits of celebrity bodies. The tagline sets the tone of the conversation, imploring members to define who is fat, who is thin, and who is thinspo (Skinny Gurl 2015). A lengthy thread takes place here discussing model, celebrity, and younger sibling of the Kardashians, Kendall Jenner. Kendall is regularly showcased in pro-ana online spaces. She has a profile on *A1 Thinspo* which details her nationality, family background, height, and weight (2013) and she appears in discussions on *Pro-ana for Me*. In one thread, her merits are discussed and although she is described as thinspirational, users criticize her personality and questions are raised about her weight, which at 130lbs is considered too high ('Kendall thinspo?' 2013). There is a general concern as to whether Kendall is worthy of thinspo and doubts are raised as to whether she belongs in this space.

These doubts are amplified in *Skinny Gossip*. A forum member initiates the discussion around Kendall: 'She's really tall and quite thin. She looks terrific, unlike her fat sisters. What do you think? Is this because of her Jenner genes?' ('KendallJenner' 2012). The member suggests that genetics have aided Kendall and thus provided her with a better, thinner body than her sisters. Such invoking of genetics recalls the citing of the Holocaust in *A1 Thinspo* explored above and echoes problematic Darwinist ideologies around race and gender which suggest that certain – white – bodies are more civilised than others (Somerville 2014, p.272).

Conflict around race pervades the Kardashian-Jenner family in that Kendall's older sister Kim Kardashian has famously constructed an ethnically ambiguous identity where she 'strategically embodies both the trope of the heavily regulated 'white' body and the trope of the curvaceous, exoticised, non-white (implicitly black) body' (Sastre 2014a, p.129). Kendall, however, occupies a more definitively white identity. *Skinny Gossip* users position her as an improvement on her Kardashian sisters because she is afforded the intersectional privilege of white slenderness they are perceived to lack.

Others agree that 'The Jenner genes made her pleasing [...] Leggy and naturally good-looking' ('KendallJenner' 2012). The implication is that the larger shape of the 'fat Kardashian sisters' is unattractive, yet the Jenner genes made their younger sister not only good-looking, but civilized. Moreover, the use of the adverb 'naturally' is instructive here: it suggests innateness to Kendall's beauty, a body unmarred by cosmetic augmentation. In other words her beauty is perceived as genuine. This positions her in direct opposition to Kim Kardashian, whose bodily authenticity is continually questioned (Sastre 2014a).

Repeatedly referred to as 'pretty', the language afforded to Kendall Jenner is delicate and feminine, unlike the description of her half-sisters who are cast as an homogenous group. As one member notes: 'The Jenner genes definitely helped her. She avoided two of her older sisters' pig faces and the family's plumpness' ('KendallJenner' 2012). Another concurs: '[...] she must have got the good genes from her dad, because the other Kardashian sisters are small and flabby!' ('KendallJenner' 2012). Members are keen to separate Kendall from the wider Kardashian family, with one exclaiming: 'I love Kendall's thin body – she's pretty. I hope she takes care of herself and doesn't end up with a body like her sisters' ('KendallJenner' 2012). As Bourdieu asserts, the more cultured bodies are those furthest from nature (1984, p.193), by which token the body in its natural state must be worked upon and improved in order to become respectable. The implication is that Kendall's sisters have neglected their bodies, which has led to their larger size. This is ironic as the Kardashians, Kim in particular, are renowned for regulating and refashioning their bodies (Sastre 2014a). Hence, the disdain *Skinny Gossip* has for the Kardashians' bodies is for the shape itself, and by suggesting that genetics made Kendall pretty and her sisters unattractive, members seek to essentialise body types.

The same member bemoans, 'I don't like people saying Kendall and Kylie are Kardashians, they are Jenners and their father is Bruce!' ('KendallJenner' 2012). She



emphasises the importance of distinguishing the Jenner sisters from the Kardashians, via their father. The Kardashian-Jenners are an American family, however, the older members are of Armenian descent, through their deceased father, Robert Kardashian (Smith 2015). The younger members of the family, Kendall and Kylie, were fathered by retired athlete, Bruce Jenner, now Caitlyn (ibid). There is consequently a distinction between the two branches of the family: the Kardashians are older and of Armenian heritage; the Jenners are younger and all-American. The Kardashians' heritage is nonetheless Caucasian, but as Dyer notes, 'there are also gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others' (1997, p.12). Hence, the Kardashians are castigated by *Skinny Gossip* as a result of their distance from the hegemonic Anglo-American whiteness embodied by the Jenners.

The denigration of the Kardashians is not only an issue of ethnicity, rather it brings to the fore a combination of intersectional privileging and marginalisation. Kendall Jenner possesses the whiteness her older sisters lack and she also embodies a range of privileges including age, body type, and class. What is more, her rise to fame, whilst likely to have been aided by Kim's celebrity, is decidedly more conservative. It is well documented that the Kardashians found fame when a sex tape of Kim was leaked in 2007, and although it has been suggested that the tape was leaked intentionally (Smith 2015), the narrative of the female celebrity being inadvertently exposed by such an indiscretion is no less a familiar one. Isabel Molina-Guzman argues of a similar 'disciplining' of the body of Latina star Jennifer Lopez by the tabloid press, suggesting that Lopez was vilified by the media for purported sex tapes and infidelity, in a way that white stars are not (2010, p.70). In short, any cultural capital the non-white star might have acquired is easily divested by the elision of their ethnicity and the untrammelled sexuality ascribed to their bodies.

This discourse is complicated by Kim Kardashian who actively utilises her sexuality and, more specifically, her accentuated buttocks to construct her image. Yet, at the

same time, Kim's discernible sexuality forecloses the possibility of her being viewed as tasteful, for, '*Feminine excess means women with visible sexuality*. It is marked on their bodies and coded as tasteless. Femininity without excess is the terrain of the middle-class' (Skeggs, 2004, p.167, emphasis in original). Kim encompasses visible sexuality *in extremis*, not only via the sex-tape, but through her curves. Her large buttocks are indicative of active female sexuality and 'marked ethnicity', whereas a smaller derriere represents modesty and whiteness (Wilkinson 2015, p.151). Kendall with her comparatively slender frame fulfils the requirements of a femininity Kim fails to embody; not only has she been refined by the 'Jenner genes', her relative youth and hidden sexuality imbue her with respectability. Kim's all-too-visible sexuality, combined with her participation in reality television, renders her the antithesis of the white, middle-class respectability adulated by *Skinny Gossip*.

Although members of *Skinny Gossip* praise Kendall Jenner, their discussions are laced with anxiety over the transience of her thinspirational status. The castigation of the Kardashian sisters and members' eagerness to differentiate them from Kendall suggests a concern that she could be corrupted by the apparently unruly Kardashian genes, as though the Jenner genes have purified her and must be cherished. This echoes deep-rooted fears around miscegenation which were particularly heightened during the Victorian period when people were concerned that the intermingling of genes would lead to degeneration (Gilman 1985, p.237). As a result, Kathleen LeBesco suggests that large bodies 'provoke racist anxieties in the white modern West because of their imagined resemblance to those of maligned, ethnic and racial Others' (2004, p.56). The larger bodies of the Kardashian sisters are seen to haunt Kendall, thereby recalling the ephemerality of the ideal body. This highlights that, 'whiteness as an ideal can never be attained' (Dyer 1997, p.78). The anxiety embodied by the Kardashian sisters may be momentarily relieved by the younger Jenner sister and the colonising

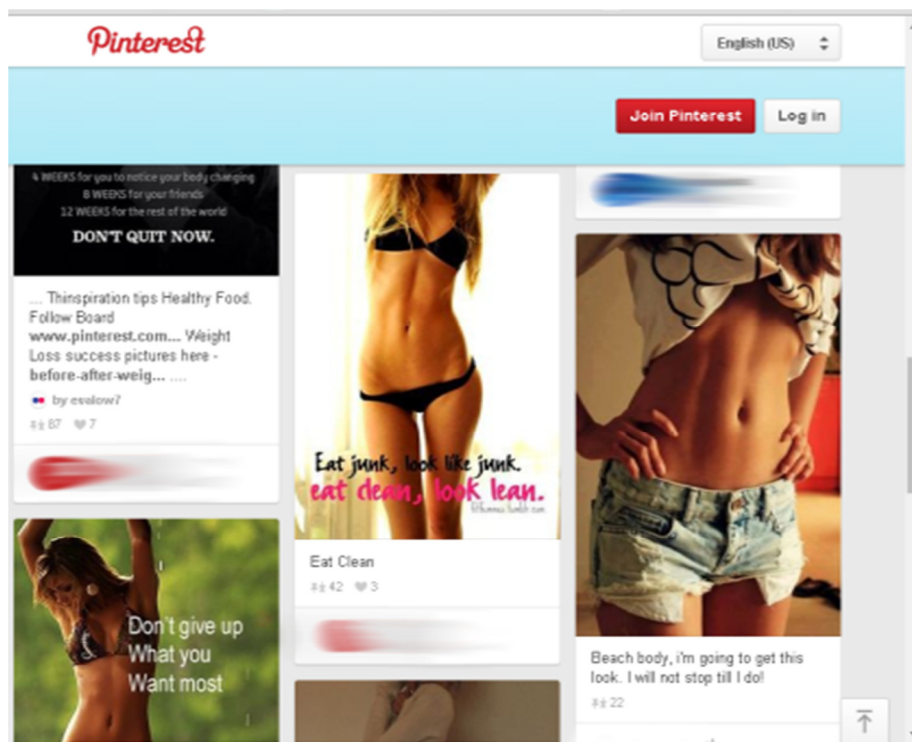
white genes of her father, but the othered Kardashian genes are always threatening to contaminate her body and her thinspirational standing.

Spaces such as *Skinny Gossip* reveal the extent to which the thin ideal is produced through Western understandings of what it means to be beautiful. As Andrea Shaw argues of black women's participation in the Miss America beauty contest, '[their] physiological blackness must be ideologically effaced to render them as acceptable players in the beauty game' (2005, p.144). Her claim reverberates with the 'beauty game' more widely, where only the whitest appear to have a chance at winning. Pro-ana online spaces express anxiety around the threat of the non-white other and a desire for 'purity' pervades their culture. However, this is not limited to the bodies to which they aspire, it is also communicated through the (little) food they consume, as the next section will explore.

### **'Eat junk, look like junk. Eat clean, look lean': consuming the pro-ana subject**

The importance of purity, in both food and self is paramount in the spaces examined. In a motivational monologue on *A1 Thinspo*, the author writes: 'What is pure, ice cream or cold water? Want to be pure? Eat fresh and pure food. Believe that you are pure, powerful, fearless in complete control. You can do it! You are Ana' (2014). As though she is responding to this call, an Instagram user in a #bonespo search declares: 'I WILL achieve my goals. I will be pure and thin and perfect by the time I step off the plane'. Here, purity, thinness, and perfection are understood as interchangeable. Similarly, members of *Pro-ana for Me* discuss feeling 'clean and pure and great' when fasting ('fasting' 2014). Such statements recall the correlations between white as a skin colour and purity and cleanliness (Dyer, 1997, p.76). In their attempts to be pure and clean then, users are also striving to be white.

In figure 12, flanked by posts urging the viewer never to give up, is an image of a slender blonde-haired white woman accompanied by the warning: 'Eat junk, look like junk. Eat clean, look lean'. This post elides junk food with a fat body and clean food with a lean body, thereby reinforcing the correlation between fatness and an ignorance of healthy eating (see LeBesco 2004, p.112). What this disregards though, is the resources required to access such 'clean' food and instead attributes blame to the individual who ignorantly consumes unhealthy produce. Posts such as this one suggest that there is no excuse for being overweight. This is because, in the logic of the self-determined subject, "failed" and "defective" forms of selfhood – childhood, illness, disability, or aged infirmity no longer find a safe haven' (McGee 2005, p.174). The fat body under neoliberalism cannot be justified and it is up to the individual to rectify this 'defect' by whatever means. Therefore, intersectional privilege in these spaces is assumed, rather than questioned, and those who lack the resources to achieve the ideal body are simply not tolerated.



**Figure 12:** images returned from a 'thinspiration' search on Pinterest.

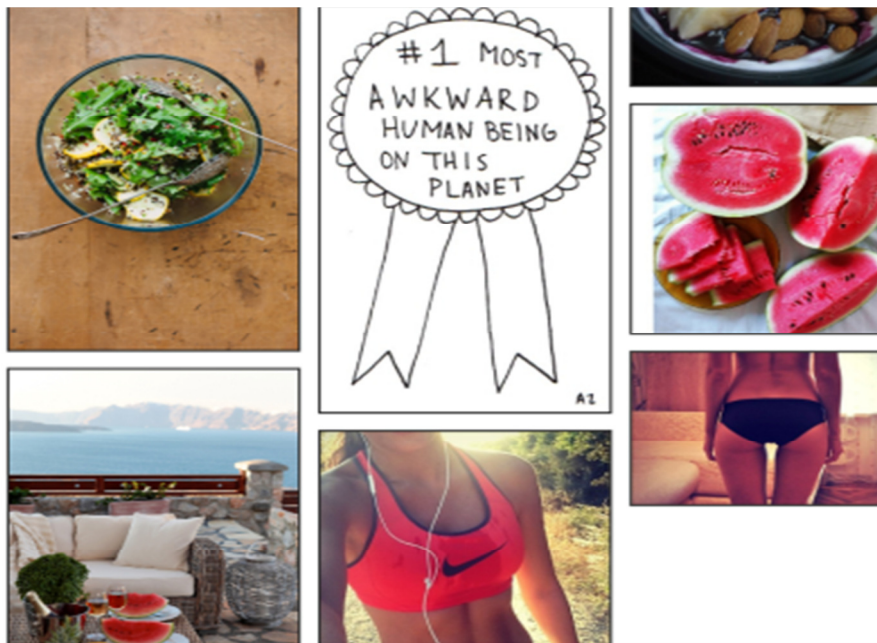
Spaces abound with 'tips and tricks' on how to hide one's eating disorder, many of which suggest performing a middle-class lifestyle in order to disguise anorexia. The author of *Kneeling to Ana* advises:

Gain a new perspective on animal rights, or organic foods, or anything else that would limit your intake [...] People will think you are merely very health conscious, and will eventually get the idea you are interested in the total well-being of your body. Trust me, this is my method and it's flawless. (2005)

Here, an ethically-aware persona can be appropriated to conceal disordered eating. As Lupton notes, making these kind of informed choices around food is indicative of a 'civilised' individual (1996, p.93). Consequently, in advising that such civilised behaviour can be adopted to mask and maintain anorexia, this user reveals the extent to which self-discipline around eating is seen as a mark of the privileged. What is more, vegetarianism has long been associated with femininity (Adams 1990 and Fiddes 1991 cited in Parsons 2015, p.142), as has healthy eating (Parsons 2015, p.83). At the same time, Cronin, McCarthy and Collins (2014, p.20) found that hipsters espoused a vegetarian or vegan diet as a means of rejecting mainstream food choices and constructing an alternative identity. By becoming vegetarian or only eating raw foods for example, the pro-ana user's food choices can simply be read as exhibiting normative femininity or an attempt to differentiate oneself from the mainstream, rather than cause for concern. Adopting such eating habits may successfully disguise an eating disorder, but they also require high cultural capital to do so.

As well as providing guidance on how to avoid eating, pro-ana online spaces recommend foods which can support weight loss. Those referenced throughout the data examined reveal that a pro-ana lifestyle relies on access to costly and even rare produce. Blogs such as *Heartthinspo* (see figure 13) intersperse images of thin bodies with artistically-displayed dishes of raw vegetables fruits, nuts, seeds, and grilled meat. Bourdieu (1984) uses the term 'habitus' to describe how individuals' tastes are denoted via their bodies, arguing that the way one treats one's body 'reveals the deepest

dispositions of the habitus' (p.190). Food choices then, become a means of asserting boundaries between different social groups (Parsons 2015). As figure 13 implies, the acquisition of a slender and toned body necessitates a diet of natural foods and even champagne. The pro-ana user is depicted here as firmly middle-class: she drinks champagne amidst scenic views, as the photograph of the bottle in the ice bucket by the sea suggests (bottom left image), and she subsists on a diet of light and refined foods (see Bourdieu 1984, p.176-185). But hers is not simply a life of leisure, for she works hard to achieve her slender figure, combining a healthy diet with exercise as the image of a woman in workout clothing suggests.



**Figure 13:** image gallery on blog, *Heartthinspo*.

Nonetheless, the portrayal of a disciplined and even glamorous lifestyle is seemingly fragmented by a post in the middle of the page depicting a rosette bearing the statement '#1 most awkward human being on this planet'. This claim to social unease, rather than simply undermining the author, operates to make her appear idiosyncratic. This chimes with a contemporary form of femininity popularised by actress and singer Zooey Deschanel. According to Anthony P. McIntyre (2015), Deschanel's star text affects an awkwardness which renders her in need of the male competency she lacks,

thereby ultimately reinforcing patriarchal gender norms. Therefore, in her claims to awkwardness, this pro-ana user suggests that she may have a great body and desirable lifestyle but she is nonetheless unthreatening and an exemplar of normative femininity.

Such unthreatening femininity is exhibited by a member of *World of Pro-ana* who in a post to the forum describes a diet of fruit smoothies and self-identifies as a geek:

I had a blueberry and banana smoothie today before I went to my exam. Then for lunch I had a multivitamin drink, and this evening, a skinny banana milkshake. Then I went to the Pokémon card league game at a family run café in town – it was fun (sure I'm a geek, I know). ('My Day' 2014)

This user subscribes to a middle-class lifestyle, and although she is restricting her food intake, her diet of smoothies, particularly those containing blueberries, which are relatively expensive, places her in a position of privilege. Furthermore, she self-identifies as a 'geek' as a result of spending her leisure time playing Pokémon card games. The figure of the geek is referent of intersectional privilege in that the white, middle-class (and usually male) subject can more readily convert it into beneficial capital, than can a racialised other – for the latter, this position is read as abject (Mendick and Francis 2012). The pro-ana user here deploys geekiness to emphasise her individuality. This distinguishes her from the mainstream and is reinforced by her noting that she plays cards in a family-run café, as opposed to a more commonplace high-street chain, for example.

By differentiating themselves in this way, users discursively produce a privileged identity. *Fallen Ana*, for instance, features low-calorie recipes, such as 'Tuna Salad With Fresh Dill' and advises eating 'tofu, sugar-free muesli, lentils, low-fat cottage cheese' in order to keep one's weight low (2010). These foods require both access to fresh ingredients and the time to prepare such dishes. Tofu, in particular, symbolises the appropriation of Asian foods undertaken by the Western middle-class. An

awareness of such foods interpellates users with high cultural capital as opposed to those whose tastes are less refined.

Aside from these food choices being a form of class-making, they, of course, operate to disguise the eating disorder. In being seen eating foods such as tuna salad and tofu, the individual will be perceived by those around her as quite simply a good, middle-class, healthy eater, rather than anorexic. The spaces examined thus emphasise the importance of *appearing* normatively feminine and healthy, even if the body is failing to function. *Fallen Ana* details the complications an eating disorder could cause and offers guidance on how to mask the outward manifestations of such issues. It lists, in alphabetical order, conditions from, 'Amenorrhea: The absence of the menstrual cycle' to 'Forgetfulness', 'Seizures' and 'Vision Impairment' (2010). That the blogger acknowledges such symptoms but continues regardless, demonstrates the extent to which being thin is indicative of health and beauty whatever the cost (Parsons 2015, p.111; see also Jones 2008, pp.94-95).

*Fallen Ana* advises using beauty products in order to disguise the superficial symptoms of illness and give the impression a healthy, feminine appearance:

Make sure you look healthy. Wear foundation to give your skin a nice colour, and body shimmer to give yourself a healthy-looking glow. Always carry lipbalm to stop chapped lips, and wear clear nailpolish – this will strengthen your nails and also make them look healthier. Keep your hair clean and use stay-in conditioner for extra shine – if it's shiny it looks healthy. (2010)

By advising that users should apply 'a nice colour [...] a healthy looking glow' to their skin, the blogger advocates 'cultivating an acceptable white feminine self' (Ahmed 1998, p.40) In glowing, the subject is exhibiting a form of body management which rests on hegemonic whiteness. Furthermore, guidance on how to present an appearance of health demonstrates the way in which the surface of the body is used to suggest one's affiliation with the middle-class and thus distance oneself from the working class (Skeggs 1997, p.84). The use of make-up and hair products is



recommended to mask the damage of anorexia and put forth an appropriate form of femininity. Pale skin, chapped lips, brittle nails and dull hair can all be rectified with a surface covering of cosmetics.

As I argued in the previous chapter, discourses of denial and disguise blur the boundaries between what it means to be anorexic and what it means to practise normative body disciplining. Here, users endorse refined foods and the use of cosmetics to create the appearance of a healthy, white, middle-class female, thereby revealing that the thin ideal is situated at the intersection of privileged social categories.

### **‘Guys will be surprised at how light you are’: heteronormative femininity**

As my critical enquiries have shown thus far, many pro-ana online spaces generate divisions with respect to age, gender, class, race, and body size. As I will now explore, in the data selected for this study, heterosexual femininity was positioned as the norm. The author of *Ethereal Anas* concedes in the section entitled, ‘Why I do it’: ‘Let’s face it skinny girls get all the guys. That’s why I can’t touch cake. If I do, food will become my lover, and that’s pathetic (2009). This statement conveys the author’s understanding of a cultural chasm between thin women, whose slender bodies remunerate them with a heterosexual relationship, and fat women, who are destined for a life of loneliness, their only companion being food. This echoes the narrative of Frankie Essex discussed in chapter two of this thesis, whereby her weight gain represented a threat to the maintenance of her heterosexual relationship.

The author of *Ethereal Anas* may be angry that ‘skinny girls get all the guys’ (indeed much of her writing is in capital letters), but her reasons for wanting to lose weight reflect the neoliberal imperative to better oneself. She even declares that if she is thin ‘people will look up to me, I will be respected’. As Skeggs found in her ethnography of working-class white women from the north-west of England, ‘fat signifies immovability; social mobility, they maintain, is less likely in a fat body’ (1997, p.83). By the same

token, being thin for pro-ana users is presented as the mode of becoming successful, at any cost and in their all-consuming quest for thinness, users show scant consideration for any aberration from the norm, even when they suggest that they do.

For instance, *Guide to Ana* claims to be 'a welcoming, gender neutral place for anyone with an ED' (2010) yet its advice always addresses a feminine subject. In its guidance on not giving in to cravings, it betrays the declaration of gender neutrality as follows: 'Guys will be able to pick you up easily. Guys will be surprised at how light you are' (*Guide to Ana* 2010). This tacitly exposes the fragility of gender binaries, for 'no masculinity arises except in a system of gender relations' (Connell 1995, p.71). In order for powerful, physically strong, masculinity to exist, there needs to be diminutive, physically fragile, femininity. Weighing so little that men can carry you with ease and even surprise shores up hegemonic masculinity. The author's claims to gender neutrality may imply that both men and women can be anorexic and therefore light enough to be lifted by a male counterpart; but it nonetheless reverts to heteronormative understandings of gender roles.

Like the magazines examined in chapter two, users repudiate womanliness and espouse girlish femininity. One of *Guide to Ana's* (2010) many reasons for not giving in to cravings is: 'You will have a delicate build', and in a discussion on *Pro-ana for Me* one user declares: 'I hate curves. I want a body like the 11 year olds who go to my dance school' ('Ana Talk' 2014). Another user responds that she does not want to look like a child 'but like a thin, delicate little teenage girl. Innocent-looking, lissom, pretty, beautiful' ('Ana Talk' 2014). This underpins the postfeminist elision of a youthful appearance with heteronormative desirability (Wearing 2007). By the same token, The *Skinny Gossip* thread on Kendall Jenner makes numerous references to her youth, asserting that she is only slim and attractive because she is young: 'I definitely think she will become bigger. She's only 17 isn't she? Let's see what she looks like after puberty [...] She's only skinny because she's a teenager, I'd be interested to see if

she'll stay that way and tone up' ('KendallJenner' 2012). In their prophesying that Kendall may not remain slim, users reveal the impossibility of ideal thinness. They recognise that she is thinspirational because she is a teenager, which is tacit acknowledgement that the ideal body must look pre-pubescent, and thus for the majority of women is impossible to maintain.

As a result, the veneration of Kendall Jenner in *Skinny Gossip* is short-lived: her height is deemed 'a bit ridiculous and not feminine' ('KendallJenner' 2012) and her deportment is criticized with comments such as, 'her posture is terrible. She walks like a lorry driver' (ibid.). Later, one user exclaims, 'Oh God, her posture... she swings her arms when she walks. Kendall, if you insist on modelling you should only do print' (ibid. 2013). Members suggest that Kendall's bodily movements betray both the gender and social class requirements of ideal thinness. As Bourdieu argues:

the most typically bourgeois deportment can be recognized by a certain breadth of gesture, posture and gait, which manifests by the amount of physical space that is occupied the place occupied in social space; and above all by a restrained, measured, self-assured tempo. (1984, p. 218)

Kendall, with her poor posture and swinging arms is judged to have failed as a genuine model because she is not expressing her body in the composed and feminine way such a role requires. The suggestion that she should focus on print modelling rather than catwalk states that she is convincingly beautiful when stationary, but in motion she falls short of the ideal. Kendall's ideal status is not only jeopardized because of the transience of youth, but by her very movements: her perfection lasts as long as she is still. By highlighting Kendall's failure to fully embody the requirements of normative femininity, users tacitly acknowledge that gender is 'a norm and a fiction' (Butler 1990, p.173). It is therefore fitting that many of the women deemed to be thinspirational in these spaces present an image of themselves which is on some level fictional, being as they are actors, models, or celebrities.

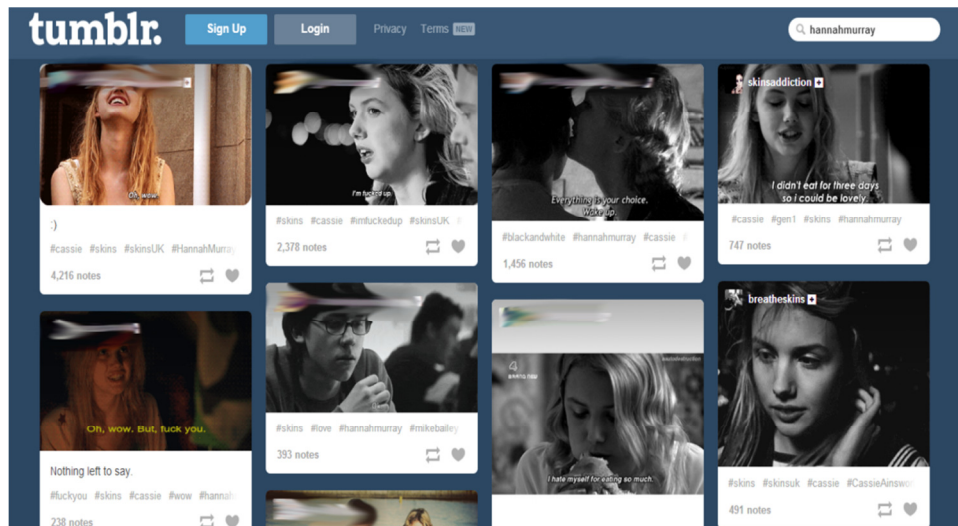
A recurring figure in pro-ana spaces is fictional character Cassie Ainsworth who first appeared in the British television show, *Skins* in 2007 as an anorexic teen. To this day, Cassie is iconic in pro-ana online spaces and she appeared across the spaces examined in this study. Although Cassie is fictional, the actress Hannah Murray who played her needed to be extremely thin in order to portray an anorectic, and as a result Murray and Cassie are conflated in pro-ana culture, both being afforded thinspirational status.

Murray could be described as one of the media's "A1" girls [...] glamorous high-achievers destined for Oxford and Cambridge' (McRobbie, 2009, p.15). After achieving success as an actress from a young age, she went on to secure a range of major roles including a lead in television series *Game of Thrones* (2011—). At the same time, she was reading English at Cambridge University (Williams 2014). Hence, the elision of Murray and Cassie epitomises the 'common sense understanding of anorexia' whereby a young girl breaks down under the immense pressure to be successful and beautiful (Saukko 2009, p.66). Whether or not Murray has an eating disorder is irrelevant to pro-ana users because, either way, she projects the perfect thinspirational image. Consequently, #proanna searches on Tumblr yielded content accompanied by both #cassie and #hannahmurray. Figure 14 demonstrates this: a still from *Skins* emblazoned with a quote from another character describing Cassie as a 'Crazy bitch. Never fucking eats'. Amongst others, are the hashtags 'hannahmurray', 'cassieainsworth' and 'cassie'.



**Figure 14:** a post resulting from a search for 'proanna' on Tumblr.

Clicking on #hannahmurray generates similar results as Figure 15 below illustrates. Although these are supposedly images of the actress, they all depict her playing Cassie. Such images tend to feature quotes from Cassie, the majority of which centre on not eating. For example, the top right image in figure 15 depicts a gif of Cassie in the second episode of *Skins* series 1 (2007) telling Sid whom she is trying to attract, 'I didn't eat for three days so I could be lovely'. Throughout the series 'lovely' is her catchphrase: in this context it is suggestive of middle-class, feminine beauty which is neither sexual nor vulgar. Like the term 'nice', it 'appears to connote a pretty, soft version of femininity, which is special and different from the everyday, but at the same time carries no risk of appearing to be distasteful' (Wood 2016, p.16). By not eating Cassie hopes to be lovely and in turn invite Sid's interest in a modest way.



**Figure 15:** results produced by clicking #hannahmurray on Tumblr.

The term 'lovely' occurs throughout pro-ana spaces, with #lovelybones generating pro-ana content on Instagram and Tumblr, and the pin, 'lovelybonespo' appearing on Pinterest. Femininity which is lovely conforms to the 'norms of niceness' (Griffin 1994, cited in Skeggs 1997) which require respectable women to distance themselves from displays of sexuality. The 'lovely' pro-ana user, therefore, can be seen to be embracing middle-class femininity proper, something which Kim Kardashian, for example, with her ethnic ambiguity and visible sexuality cannot fulfil.

Pro-ana users are therefore interpellated as middle-class white women with the potential to realise their loveliness through weight loss. As such, searches for 'thinspiration' and 'pro-anorexia' on Pinterest evoke intersections of privilege. Contained in the motivational platitudes that dominate such search results, is a wealth of culturally-specific markers indicating, for example, gender and nationality. The first two posts from the left in figure 16 below adopt a list format to detail reasons to lose weight, such as: 'For the skinny jeans, for the mini skirts [sic], for the crop-tops, for the short shorts, for the bikinis, for the stares, for the fun, for the satisfaction, for the confidence, for your health, for your happiness, for you'. The post catalogues the reasons for dieting, from the concrete to the abstract, and asserts that the most important reason to lose weight (and it is accentuated in a different colour), is 'for you'.

Such rhetoric affirms that achieving thinness is a practice which is entirely self-motivated and therefore pre-empts any suggestion that it could be culturally-contingent. One may diet ‘for the stares’, in other words, for the approval or envy of others, but ultimately weight loss here is presented as an activity one undergoes for one’s own good.

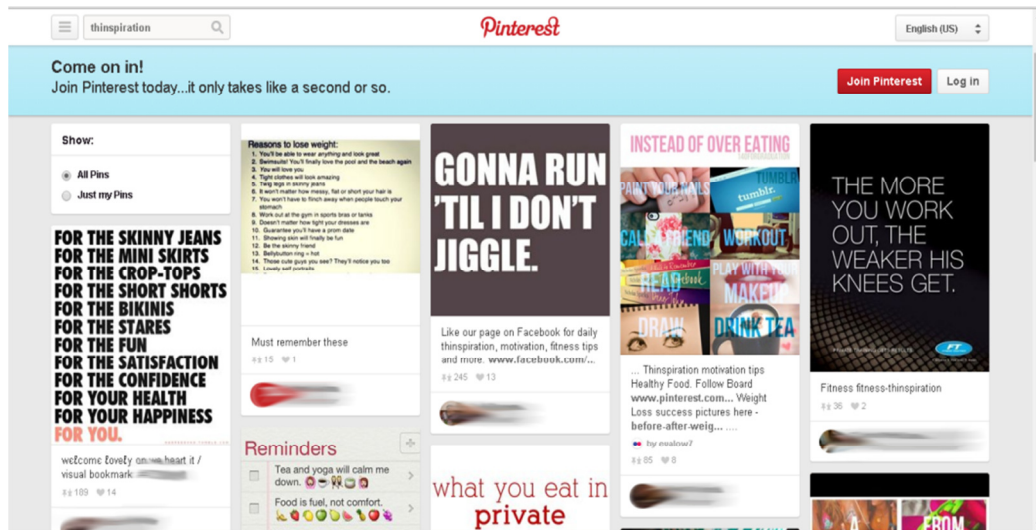


Figure 16: results produced by a search for ‘thinspiration’ on Pinterest.

The clothing to which this first post urges individuals to aspire consists of feminine items which highlight particular parts of a woman’s body, such as the legs (‘skinny jeans’, ‘mini skirts’) or the stomach (‘crop-tops’, ‘short shorts’, ‘bikinis’). These items all accentuate, and even expose, the female body and users are encouraged to enjoy ‘the stares’ slenderness will give them in minimal clothing; to revel in their postfeminist *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Not only do posts such as these address an able-bodied, cis-gendered subject, they also place the reader in a discourse which McRobbie suggests is regularly used in media reporting to highlight Western sexual freedom (McRobbie, 2009, p.27). She argues that this is ‘a discourse which celebrates the freedoms of fashion-conscious “thong-wearing” Western girls in contrast to those young women who, for example, wear the veil’ (ibid.). Consequently, figure 16 implies that motivating oneself requires operating through a Western, heteronormative gaze.

Likewise, the post second from the left in figure 16 enumerates 'Reasons to lose weight', such as: 'You will love you' and 'Be the skinny friend'. The tenth reason is that weight loss will 'guarantee you'll have a prom date'. It appears that the user is addressing a teenage audience who may be planning to attend their end of year dance at school or college, most likely in America, as the term 'prom' suggests. Although it does not state that one's prom date should be of the opposite sex, the fourteenth reason to lose weight states that attracting men is of utmost importance: 'Those cute guys you see? They'll notice you too'. Slenderness here is framed as the key to successful heterosexuality, and as the image on the far right asserts, 'The more you work out, the weaker his knees get'. These posts continually underline that a thinspirational body will put you in the thrall of men.

However this is not a simple reversal to patriarchal norms of sexuality: a person who is weak at the knees, here the male observer, is emasculated, having been overpowered by the beauty of the slender woman before him. As such, whilst the traditional male gaze positions women as passive objects, here the postfeminist 'girlfriend gaze *cultivates* women's control over her own libido and turns it into "hotness"' (Winch 2013, p.22, emphasis in original). In these posts – as in the Reddit posts examined in the previous chapter – women are urged to engage in compulsory heterosexuality as a means of empowerment rather than to reject it as oppressive. This illustrates the way in which neoliberal individualism reframes structural inequalities as desirable and, in their rigid focus on self-improvement, users shore up rather than criticise intersectional marginalisation.

Posts across the sample presuppose intersectional privilege and perpetuate the primacy of hegemonic identities. This is obfuscated by a neoliberal rhetoric which positions the individual as an autonomous being whose destiny is her own responsibility. Such rhetoric though, does not always adopt an upbeat register of self-



help and motivation and numerous posts emanate depression and self-hatred, as the next section will explore.

### **From self-help to self-hatred: #grunge**

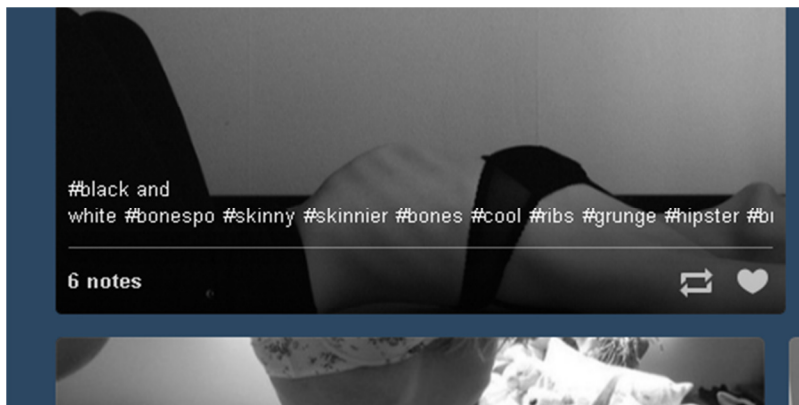
The data analysis revealed polarised representations of the pro-ana subject. Broadly speaking users tended to champion either a polished look comprising images of slender women in brightly-coloured gym clothing, bowls of fruit, and motivational platitudes as examined above, or, they espoused a grunge aesthetic, indicated by dark clothing, cigarettes, and statements of depression and suicide. These may appear to be juxtaposing attitudes: the former denotes enthusiastic self-worth, whereas the latter bespeaks apathy and self-loathing, yet both evoke a white, middle-class individualism which disregards intersectional inequalities.

The grunge style adopted by the latter group is a look which became popular during the 1990s; it is typified by the nihilism of rock band Nirvana and a backlash against the consumerism of the previous decade (Arnold 2001, p.26). Grunge culture therefore centres on a rejection of the status quo which is cloaked in a rhetoric of hopelessness. Whilst it has invited comparison to, and in many ways is borne out of, punk, scholars agree that grunge lacked punk's attention to race and class politics, instead exhibiting a sense of despair and alienation (Arnold 2001; Burke 2012; Shevory 1995). It is consequently fitting that pro-ana users identify with grunge style, as their focus is more on the personal than it is on the political.

Specifically, Burke (2012) has drawn parallels between the pro-ana phenomenon and grunge culture, suggesting that grunge adumbrates pro-ana in its aligning of a thin body with distress. In the sample examined in this study, grunge is typically represented by images of thin young women with hashtags and/or statements of despair. Some posters directly reference grunge with hashtags such as #grungestyle #softgrunge or #grunge, and others echo its sentiments with allusions to self-hatred

and suicide. This type of pro-ana content chimes with sentiments promulgated by grunge icons such as lead singer of Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, who became renowned for the statement, 'I hate myself and I want to die', originally intended as the title of Nirvana's third album, *In Utero* (Cross 2002).

An image posted on Instagram in a #bonespo search epitomises such content.<sup>32</sup> The image features a white girl with bleached hair and dark eye make-up. She pulls at her face in an outward display of despair and the attendant hashtags such as 'suicidal' and 'depressed' along with the caption 'All I wanna do is' followed by three gun emoticons serve to emphasise her suicidal state. Yet the hashtags 'grunge' and 'grungestyle' also serve to align the user with a subculture. Her depression may be very real, but it nonetheless affords her membership to a particular group which Figure 17 below suggests is 'cool'.



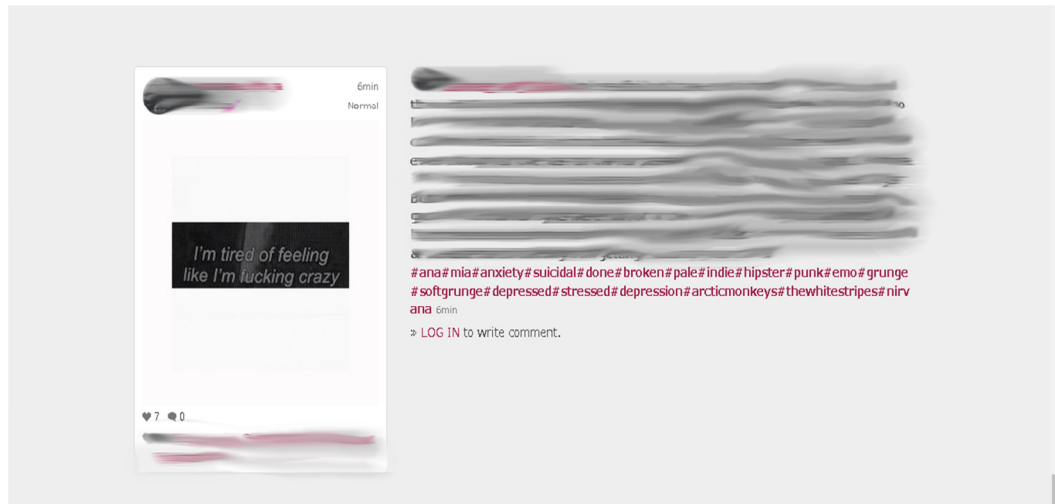
**Figure 17:** an image generated by a search for 'bonespo' on Tumblr.

This image from a Tumblr 'bonespo' search depicts a skinny woman reclining in such a way that her jutting ribs are emphasised. The user has affixed hashtags including '#skinnier #bones #cool, #grunge #hipster'. This combination of hashtags positions extreme thinness as marker of an alternative identity, as indicated by 'grunge' and 'hipster', both of which evoke white, middle-class habitus. If fashion can be understood as exhibiting the paradoxical desire to fit in and stand out at the same time (Simmel cited in Entwistle 2000, p.116), then by indicating an affiliation with grunge style, pro-

<sup>32</sup> Image not included as it features identifying information.

ana users are able to align themselves with a subculture and display their rejection of the mainstream simultaneously. However, as Jake Kinzey (2012, p.3) argues of the hipster, in their quest to be utterly individual, they simply end up being the same as everyone else. These pro-ana users may have angered the media and incensed Internet moderators, but their style is all too familiar.

According to Kinzey, 'if there is a musical movement associated with the hipster it is certainly indie' (2012, p.25). Likewise, pro-ana grunge posts often combine statements of self-hatred with a penchant for indie music. Figure 18 from an Instagram search for #ana illustrates the statement, 'I'm tired of feeling like I'm fucking crazy' and is accompanied by a paragraph lamenting lost love which the user suggests was abusive. The hashtags alongside this post consist of a combination of terms to suggest the user's distress such as, '#anxiety #suicidal [...] #depressed', whilst others indicate their affiliation with an abundance of subcultures: '#pale #indie #hipster #punk #emo #grunge #softgrunge' and finally bands with whom they wish to associate: '#arcticmonkeys #thewhitestripes #nirvana'. These hashtags construct a white, middle-class identity whereby the user is displaying an affinity with white subcultures and the fandom of white, middle-class indie bands. They also use the hashtag 'pale' which, although not exclusively suggestive of skin colour, when accompanied by hashtags evoking whiteness, implies that this is the hue of a distressed person's skin. Indeed, #pale appeared throughout the sample in posts which invoked suicide, grunge, and depression.



**Figure 18:** a post produced by a search for #ana on Instagram.

Declarations of self-hatred combined with the pursuit of subcultural style abound in pro-ana online spaces. This has the effect of positioning pro-ana culture as a white, middle-class leisure pursuit rather than a critique of the status quo. What is more, pro-ana users tend to direct their rage at themselves rather than at external forces. As one user on *World of Pro-ana* writes: 'In summary I just f\*\*king hate myself and my body. For how it looks and its performance' ('hate my body' 2014). Such statements display anger not at structural inequalities, which in the case of this particular post could be at the impossible demands put upon women to realise an ideal body, but a wrath which has been turned inwards. This resonates with grunge culture in that '[it] occupies an emotional terrain in which the need for self-help devolves into the desire for self-annihilation' (Shevory 1995, p.34). The problem with such self-annihilation is not only the dangers it presents to the individual's well-being, but that it reduces anorexia to individual psychopathology, which feminist scholars of the body have for so long contested (see Malson and Burns 2009, p.1).

### **Conclusion: upholding intersectional privilege**

This chapter has examined the way in which pro-ana online spaces occur at the intersection of white, middle-class, heterofeminine, youthful, able-bodied privilege. Eating disorders may not only affect the privileged, but the pro-anorexia phenomenon

draws on hegemonic bodies to 'thinspire' its users. At the same time, the non-white, lower class, disabled, or aging body is othered or simply ignored. By exploring pro-ana online spaces using intersectional privilege as my critical paradigm, I sought to show how an ostensibly marginalised group defines itself through both access to privilege and exclusion of groups who are not deemed to be in possession of cultural and embodied capital.

My analysis demonstrated how certain bodies are subject to denigration in terms of race and class, and for not adequately conforming to heterofemininity. As the *Skinny Gossip* thread suggested, even the initially venerated body of Kendall was criticised for its proximity to her ethnically-ambiguous, older siblings. Further, this chapter showed that the thin ideal is not only constructed through the aesthetics of the body, but also through food choices. It illustrated the way in which users are urged to consume middle-class foods as a way of disguising their eating disorder. In so doing, thinness is upheld as a marker of middle-class privilege.

In the section on heterosexual femininity, I explored how pro-anorexia users' endorsement of a girlish and 'lovely' femininity reveals the way in which heteronormative, middle-class ideals dominate contemporary thinness culture. Users venerate fictional characters such as Cassie Ainsworth, constructing their pro-ana identities by producing spaces which rely on illusion. Cassie embodies the cultural stereotype of the anorexic and, in users' adulation of her, they reinforce common sense understandings of what it means to have an eating disorder. This effectively disavows an intersectional approach to eating disorders and reinstates them within the realm of privilege.

In order to 'thinspire' themselves, pro-ana enthusiasts draw on motivational slogans and images, urging one another to never give up. In the final section of this chapter, I argued that such posts are underpinned by assumptions of white, Western privilege, suggesting that users adopt the upbeat language of neoliberalism to encourage each

other in their quest for thinness. Nonetheless, as I discussed, not all pro-ana spaces take a cheerful approach to weight loss. Many of them espouse grunge culture and make declarations of despair to communicate their pro-ana status. Above all though, the bodies adorning these spaces may be starved, but their owners do not look impoverished. As such, rarely are 'real' images of emaciated lower class individuals in unfashionable clothing uploaded to these spaces, consequently emphasising that it is the privileged body to which one must aspire. Whilst Burke (2012) warns that pro-ana culture is dangerous in its promotion of distress as a form of agency, I suggest that its espousal of the optimistic anorectic is equally concerning: both approaches obfuscate and neutralise structural inequalities with their promotion of rigid individualism.

This chapter has revealed that for the pro-ana subject it is not enough simply to be thin, for it is a young, white, physically able, middle-class body, styled in fashionable clothing which colonises pro-ana online spaces. Pro-ana culture communicates itself through the rhetoric of privilege, and whether this centres on self-improvement or self-hatred, users are suffering for this lifestyle. As such, in the next chapter I examine the role of pain in pro-ana online spaces questioning the extent to which it is presented as an intrinsic to normative femininity.

## Chapter 5: Painful femininity

### Introduction

The last chapter examined intersectional privilege in pro-ana online spaces. Through my critical enquiries, I sought to demonstrate how pro-ana culture reinforces normative understandings of anorexia as a white, middle-class, heterofeminine concern. In the latter half of the chapter, I identified two discursive representations of the pro-ana subject: the upbeat advocate of self-help and the self-hating proponent of grunge. Building on these findings, this chapter considers the role of pain and suffering in pro-ana online spaces. As I have argued, the discourses of pro-ana online spaces are increasingly merging with those of normative femininity. On the one hand this allows pro-ana spaces to hide in plain sight, but on the other, this merging offers an opportunity to identify and critique the dangers inherent in normative conceptions of gender.

In this chapter, I propose that the suffering subject of pro-ana online spaces approaches the pain of anorexia either as a beneficial investment or, with anger and depression that she directs at herself. I suggest that both these approaches to pain are disciplinary. As Foucault (1979, p.138) argues 'discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)'. By converting their pain into a worthwhile investment, users become economically useful and, by turning their suffering inwards, they become politically compliant. In other words, in suffering in order to be skinny, pro-ana enthusiasts are rendered 'less socially oriented and more centripetally focussed on self-modification' (Bordo 2003, p.166). The objective of this chapter then, is to explore how pain is presented as necessary for realising the thin body required of normative femininity.

I understand normative femininity, not as substantive or fixed (Butler 1990) but as an 'ever-changing, homogenizing ideal' (Bordo 2003, p.166). In line with Scharff (2011), I

read it through Butler's (1990) notion of gender intelligibility whereby 'heterosexual conventions structure the coherence of sex, gender, and desire' (Scharff 2011, p.14). Nonetheless, I argue that not only heterosexuality, but race, age, embodiment, and class all offer themselves as matrices through which normative femininity is constructed. This chapter explores the pain involved in pursuing such an elusive, regulatory ideal.

It is divided into three sections. The first examines the cultural-historical context in which the coupling of pain and femininity is situated. It explores how the contemporary pro-ana user – albeit, not necessarily wittingly – draws on these cultural performances of suffering women to communicate her pain and to assert herself as authentically anorexic. This anticipates the second section of the chapter where I interrogate the discourse of 'no pain no gain' which pervades these spaces. I contend that in the present day, the hard-working body in pain has been reconstructed as a form of neoliberal self-improvement, a prerequisite for the successful postfeminist female. In the final section I question the potential for resistance in these spaces. In their accounts of the pain involved in achieving the slender body, do users enact a powerful critique of normative femininity?

### **Normative femininity and the cultural performances of pain**

Cultural studies research into anorexia locates it within a history of female piety, the attributes of which are fasting and suffering (Bell 1985; Bynum 1997; Hepworth 1999; Vandereycken and Van Deth 1994). In *Holy Anorexia* (1985), Rudolph M. Bell proposes a direct correlation between the self-starving female saints of the middle-ages and the present-day anorectics, both of whom engage[d] in such activity in attempts to free themselves from patriarchal control. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, however, disagrees with the parallels between these two groups of women, suggesting that 'to conflate the two is to ignore the cultural context and the distinction between sainthood



and patienthood' (1988, p.46). Brumberg's insistence on the anorectic-as-patient is representative of the biomedical bias which pervades her history of anorexia; a bias which, as I explored in chapter one of this thesis, persists in Western cultural understandings of disordered eating to this day.

For instance, it has latterly been suggested that Catherine of Siena, the first and perhaps most famous 'holy anorexic', self-starved, not out of commitment to God, but because she was ill (Vandereycken and Van Deth 1994, p. 27). There is a danger here, argues Caroline Walker Bynum, of simply suggesting that 'these medieval eating disorders are different from nineteenth- and twentieth-century ones only because medieval people "theologized" what we today "medicalize" (1997, p.145). Hence, Bynum's analysis is much more nuanced. She suggests that the notion of the holy anorectic emerged because 'in medieval Europe (as in many countries today) women are associated with food preparation and distribution rather than food consumption' (1997, p.146). She locates female self-starvation within a set of other religious practices women endured, not solely to show their commitment to God but also to paradoxically resist patriarchal control (Bynum 1997; see also Ash 1990, p.95). For example, Catherine of Siena and Columba of Rieti were said to have rebelled against their parents' plans to marry them off through their 'extreme food and sleep deprivation, their frenetic giving away of paternal resources, and their compulsive service of family members in what were not necessarily welcome ways' (Bynum 1997, pp.147-148). Rather than a form of blind acquiescence, religious activity – of which self-starving was a part – became one way in which medieval women could resist their intolerable situations.

In contrast to this, instead of affording women agency, Freudian psychoanalysis has historically charged women with an innate masochism (Bartky 1990, p.52). Freud wrote of the masochistic tendencies of femininity, juxtaposing them with the sadistic nature of masculinity ([1905] 1991, p.71), thereby rendering women passive recipients of pain

and men active inflictors. However, the term masochism, which was coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, originally focussed on the notion of masochism as male (Silverman 1988, p.35) and as Kaja Silverman argues, masochism in men is seen as pathological, whereas in women it is seen as normal (1988, p.36). According to this view, women are always already pathological subjects doomed to occupy 'a precarious balance between narcissistic gratification and an ever-present dissatisfaction fuelled by a deep-seated self-hate' (Davis 1995, p.45).

This is, however, complicated by the celebration of male masochism in Christianity, with the wounded figure of Christ at the centre of its ideology. Indeed, Jennifer Ash cites a number of Medieval texts where Christ's 'crucified body is the object of worship, but it is also the object of desire. The bleeding wounds are privileged, invested with meaning which is not only salvific but also erotic' (1990, p.82). What this suggests, is that the practice of the Holy Anorectics was, during that particular period and in that context, actually the appropriation of a *masculine* discourse within Christianity, thereby reinforcing the notion of female resistance, albeit through the adoption of masculine behaviours. However, as Morag MacSween argues, 'in a bourgeois and patriarchal culture, women *cannot* attain the socially valued self, since that self, far from being gender-neutral, is in fact masculine, and depends for its existence on an opposition with the receptive feminine self' (1993, p.53). In this way, women are inserted into an irresolvable paradox where the possibilities for resistance are always foreclosed.

Importantly though, even Freud himself acknowledged that masculinity and femininity are more complex than a binary suggests and that all individuals possess a combination of different gender qualities (Malson 1998, p.15). Therefore, fellow psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch's contention that femininity is a combination of masochism, narcissism, and passivity is, as Malson points out, clearly reductionist (ibid., p.165-166). Malson consequently argues that interpretations of anorectics as masochists are borne out of the hailing of women as such, not the result of anorectics'

innate masochism (*ibid.*). By the same token, although pro-ana online spaces are replete with statements of self-hatred and an agonising emphasis on physical appearance, it would be remiss to argue that they merely demonstrate individual users' masochistic narcissism. Rather, as I will show, these spaces are composed of a bricolage of cultural assumptions around femininity which users deploy as a means of expressing their identity.

Contemporary anorexia has been described by a number of feminist scholars as a protest against the constraints of being a woman in patriarchal society (Bordo 2003; Grosz 1994; Orbach 1986). Susie Orbach even draws comparisons between modern-day anorectics and the political hunger strikes of the suffragettes (1986, p.27), much to the vexation of Brumberg who describes this as a 'well-intentioned but desperate attempt to dignify these all too-frequent disorders' (1988, p.36). In fact, Brumberg takes issue with the cultural model of anorexia in general, suggesting that it 'denies the biomedical component of this destructive illness by obscuring the helplessness and desperation of those who suffer from it' (*ibid.*). Similarly unconvinced by the protest paradigm, Tzachi Zamir undermines those who self-starve as 'indifferent' and 'highly self-centered' (2012, p.147; Zamir bases his evaluation on having read autobiographies of anorectics). Whilst it is difficult to argue persuasively that the plight of the anorectic is entirely politically motivated – indeed, doing so may conceal the very real distress of the individual's situation – to see their plight as wholly pathological or simply self-centred, as Zamir does, is equally unhelpful.

As the discussion thus far has shown, scholars cannot agree whether the anorexic – holy or contemporary – is rebelling against the constraints of femininity or, unhealthily reinforcing them. Fortunately, Bordo, in her elegant undoing of the protest/disease binary, urges us to recognise the possibility that anorexia can, and does, occupy both factions: the eating disordered individual may be deeply distressed but her pain '[communicates] an excruciating message about the gender politics that regulate our

lives' (2003, p.65). The pro-anorexic individual, in her quest for thinness, emphasises this more than ever.

For instance, pro-ana site, *Ethereal Anas* advises upon painful activity in order to distract users from the desire to eat, including a tip which recurs throughout pro-ana online spaces: 'Put an elastic band on your wrist, tie it even tighter and snap it whenever you think about eating' (2009). Users are advised to punish themselves in order to achieve their goals: 'Tie yourself down if you have to [...] Put your favourite foods in the freezer [...] Spill coffee, salt, pepper, or anything gross on your food "by accident" [...] Sit on your hands [...] Bite yourself' (*Ethereal Anas* 2009). This advice chimes with Bell's description of the holy anorexic:

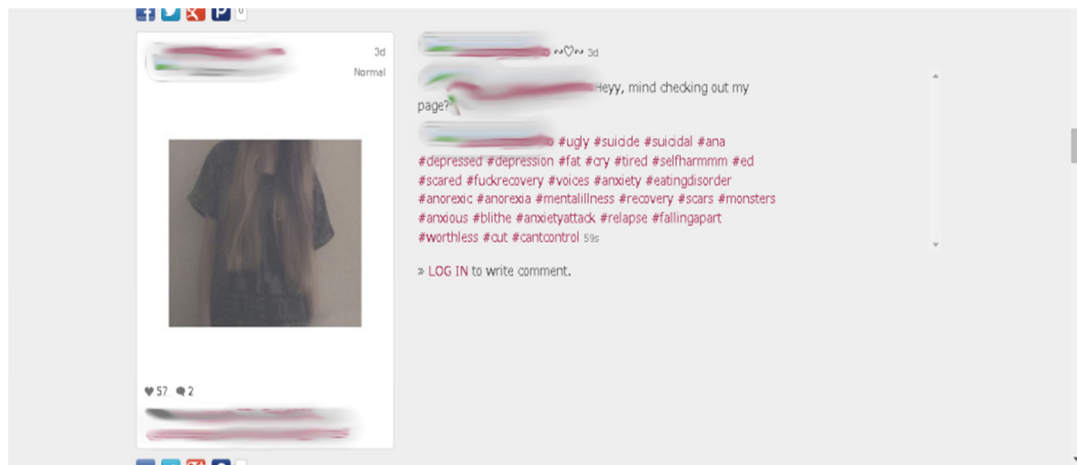
The girl, that she may become more beautiful in God's eyes, may cut off her hair, scourge her face and wear coarse rags. To be more mindful of the Passion she may walk about with thirty-three sharp stones in her shoes or drive silver nails into her breasts. She stands through the night with her arms outstretched in penitential prayer and stops eating, taking her nourishment from the host. (1985, p.19)

Unlike the pious women of the medieval period though, the contemporaneous pro-ana user does not foul her food or self-mortify to become closer to Christ. Albeit, the outcome is the same: a starved and suffering body in pursuit of the impossible. In other words, anorectics – past and present – are embroiled in a quest for their own Holy Grail.

In order to communicate that they are pro-anorexic, users perform an identity which draws on cultural understandings of pain and suffering. This is not to deny the very real pain these users are likely enduring, but to argue that they communicate their suffering in line with a previously-established façade which signals to others their membership of a specific group. Erving Goffman uses the term 'front' to describe the figurative mask worn during the individual's performance of the self, arguing that 'when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he [sic] finds that a particular front has already been established for it' (1969, p.37). Goffman may have been writing about human

interaction in the physical world, but this applies equally to interaction online. As such, when posting images about anorexia, users invariably accompany them with recognised hashtags which serve both to communicate the pain they are enduring and to group themselves with like-minded others.

Figure 19 depicts an Instagram search for the hashtag 'ana'. The post itself features what appears to be a selfie of the user captioned with a simple heart emoji. When another user comments, 'Heyy, mind checking out my page?' the original poster responds with a stream of hashtags, presumably intended to communicate her troubled state of mind. Through this list of words, we are able to garner that the user is struggling to recover from anorexia (#ed #scared #fuckrecovery), that her mental health is suffering (#suicide #suicidal #depressed #depression #selfharmmm #voices #anxiety #mentalillness) and that she is unhappy with her physical appearance (#fat #ugly). The pain she wishes to communicate has been converted into hashtags, neatly categorising her with others who suffer similarly. As users learn that attendant to anorexia hashtags are those which invoke self-harm and depression, such posts become self-generating.



**Figure 19:** a post produced by a search for #ana on Instagram.

Elaine Scarry famously argued that physical pain cannot be expressed through language: 'whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures that unsharability through its resistance to language' (1996, p.4). Nonetheless,

Scarry's contentions have been refuted by Ann Jurecic (2012) who concedes that whilst this may be true of the extreme pain of torture (which Scarry examines in detail), the same cannot be said of milder forms of pain. The problem here, argues Jurecic (2012, p.44), 'is not how to find a language for pain, but rather how to make readers receptive to stories of pain'. The pro-ana user who resorts to hashtags to express her suffering does so because, in this context, it is her most effective means of being heard. She is able to measure the receptiveness of her readers through the 'likes' she may receive to her post or, for example, when the hashtags she coins are adopted by others. Users of these spaces are therefore engaging in a performance of anorexia which has already been established by Western cultural beliefs around femininity, and it is now being perpetuated by hashtags.

It is not only physical pain, such as cutting and hunger, which are represented in pro-ana online spaces, mental and emotional pain play a key part in the life of the [pro-]anorectic. As a result, references to depression are ubiquitous, both via the deployment of #depression and more detailed discussions in the forums. In *Pro-ana for Me's* subsection on depression, one user asks: 'Do any of you also suffer from depression? If so, why, what causes it? Is it ED related? And how do you deal with your depression?' ('depression' 2013). The responders are generally in agreement that their depression is not related to their eating disorder:

Yes, I can't isolate what causes my depression. It's not related to my ED, but they seem to go hand in hand [...] I have had depression for 5 years now. It's not linked to my ED, but I don't exactly love my body [...] Yeah for me my ED adds to depression but it isn't the cause [...] It seems that the ED just worsens depression. ('depression' 2013)

Only one user claims that her depression is eating disorder related, and the thread is summarised by one subscriber who states: 'I think they are connected. EDs can make you more depressed and depression can make you get an ED. It doesn't have to be this way. But to me, they seem to be bedfellows' ('depression' 2013). Whether causal

or not, depression and eating disorders are constantly aligned in pro-ana online spaces. It is, however, disputable as to what users mean when they declare that they are depressed or deploy ‘#depressed’ in a post. On the one hand, they could be referring to a clinical diagnosis, on the other, they could be hyperbolically exclaiming their annoyance at not being as thin as they wish. There are certainly gradations of seriousness and flippancy with which this word is used and, whilst the thread referenced above certainly errs more on the serious side, ‘depression’ is often deployed offhandedly in these spaces.

Pro-ana enthusiasts present the extent to which they suffer, both physically and mentally, as a form of embodied capital. Discussions and posts on the level of pain and discomfort an individual endures often serve as a means of gaining the respect and admiration of others. This is illuminated by two threads in *Pro-ana for Me*: ‘the benefits of being skinny’ and ‘the cons of being skinny’. The former thread depicts users listing what they deem to be the advantages of having an emaciated body, the most referenced being the ability to wear children’s clothes, to hide easily, and fit in to small spaces (‘the benefits of being skinny’ 2014). Passing unnoticed is described as a welcome attribute to extreme thinness, and therefore, the feminine ideal of taking up as little space as possible is pursued to its logical conclusion.

However, this thread also acknowledges that a drawback of such thinness is being verbally abused by men. One user states: ‘Last night I was completely covered up but I had tights on. Two guys shouted at me on my way to the shop. Awkward. I’m not even that thin’ (‘the benefits of being skinny’ 2014). Another user concurs, detailing a similar experience where she was shouted at by men for being so thin (ibid.). However, whilst users bemoan such taunts, they do not criticise the men’s sense of entitlement over the female body. At the same time, these stories operate as opportunities for users to boast about their extreme thinness using the words of others, rather than their own. By

framing such incidences as 'awkward' or irritating, users retain a sense of modesty which reinforces a normatively feminine identity.

As users begin to deliberate over the apparent problems attached to extreme thinness, a participant instigates the second thread, 'the cons of being skinny,' where users discuss the pain and discomfort they undergo as a result of being so thin. These examples range from the mildly inconvenient and comedic, to the decidedly more serious. One user complains of the annoyance of objects falling between her thighs, lacking as they do a buffer of fat which would prevent this: 'It's annoying when I drop things and they fall through my thigh gap. Once I dropped my lighter and it fell down the toilet. This evening I dropped a slice of tomato and it fell through the gap landing on the dirty carpet' ('the cons of being skinny' 2014). A thigh gap, where the tops of thighs do not meet, is coveted in these spaces as it indicates extreme thinness. At the same time, many users attest to the difficulty in achieving it. Therefore, predicaments such as dropping food and lighters may be 'annoying' but, they are also valued here for they only happen to those who have realised such an emaciated state.

Another user compiles a list of problems which indicate that her body is struggling to maintain extreme thinness:

I get back pain sitting on the hard chairs in class because my spine is so uncomfortable [...] after coming back indoors from the cold I am freezing for over an hour, but everyone else warms up in 15 minutes. Waking up cold in the middle of the night. Getting dizzy just from standing up'. ('the cons of being skinny' 2014)

Users list reason upon reason as to why being thin is difficult, yet the subtext is that such problems are desirable and a sign that one is successfully starving. As one user writes after listing her ailments, 'but I want this...' ('the cons of being skinny' 2014). The suffering these individuals describe differentiates them from others whose bodies are fully operational. Their descriptions evoke an ethereal body: one with a gap through which objects may pass, one which bears so little fat that its bones rub directly against



external surfaces, a body that is vulnerable to the cold and so weak it is barely able to stand upright.

The trope of the ethereal thin woman has been explored in depth by Malson (1998) who found her anorexic informants drew on such cultural representations to make sense of their experiences. She argues that constructions of the anorexic body as ethereal bolster hegemonic understandings of femininity but they also offer possibilities for transcendence (1998, p.186). Conversely, I am unwilling to suggest such representations are transgressive, at least in the context of pro-ana online spaces. The image of the ethereal woman resonates with the coveted consumptive look of the Victorian period which 'considered illness to be a source of female beauty, where in fact fashionable beauty was the source of illness' (Vandereycken and Van Deth 1994, p.215). That is, in such representations, normative feminine beauty and suffering are already too closely aligned for meaningful resistance to occur.

As Susan Sontag points out, during this time, 'agony became romantic in a stylized account of the disease's preliminary symptoms (for example, debility is transformed into languor) and the actual agony was simply suppressed' (1978, p.29). When pain becomes a style, it can have the effect of disregarding the suffering involved in the illness itself. As a result, pro-ana subjects who espouse a romanticised or fashionable version of the effects of self-starvation may find that their extreme thinness is more readily accepted, but the painful lived reality of anorexia is obscured. Ultimately, pro-ana online spaces depict women who are suffering deeply because of a culture which undermines their gender, however, when their depictions of pain dovetail with those prescribed by normative femininity, possibilities for resistance are at risk of being thwarted.

Whether it is the brief sting of plucking one's eyebrows, the day-long discomfort of walking in high-heeled shoes, or the long-term pain of cosmetic surgery, 'no price is too

great, no process too repulsive, no operation too painful for the woman who would be beautiful' (Dworkin 1974, 115). Femininity proper requires that women undergo painful procedures in order to achieve it and, such suffering is invariably presented as empowering and even pleasurable. As Gill notes, in postfeminist culture, even 'the application of boiling wax to the genital region and then its use to pull out hairs by their roots can be discursively (re)constructed as 'pampering' (2009, p.105). In short, the postfeminist subject is expected to suffer actively, for this is what it means to be a woman (McRobbie 2009, p.98). Consequently, Gailey's (2009) assertion that pro-ana users actively choose to suffer is thrown into doubt when viewed through the lens of postfeminism.

Undoubtedly, many beauty practices can provide pleasure and enjoyment, but they also serve to remind women constantly of their deficiencies which apparently only beauty products can rectify (Bartky 2004, p.24). Pain in this context, whether physical or emotional, is a female economy. As Liz Frost argues, 'western consumer capitalism needs women to feel their bodies are inadequate, so that they spend large amounts of money on products to alleviate this sense' (2001, p.29). The painful body modification activity with which women are targeted, such as dieting, exercise, cosmetic surgery, and even hair-removal, are all presented as solutions to assuage the pain they are supposed to feel at failing at be properly feminine. For Carole Spitzack, anorexia, 'offers images of females who at once support and undermine the performance criteria regulating gender in contemporary capitalism' (1993, p.3). The following two sections of this chapter will now explore how pro-ana users communicate this contradictory identity.

### **'No pain no gain': the hard work of being thin**

Having explored pro-ana users' cultural performances of pain, this section interrogates how users convert their suffering into a worthwhile and admirable undertaking. Pain is

often presented in pro-ana online spaces as a compulsory investment one must make in order to realise, and be worthy of, the ideal body.<sup>33</sup> Pain and hard work were often conflated in the sample analysed for this study thereby reinforcing Hesse-Biber's argument that the fitness movement is a new form of asceticism (1996, p.45). However, whilst many of these posts have religious undertones, urging as they do a puritanical life of hard work and self-discipline (Kilwein 1989), the gains such users seek are not pious.

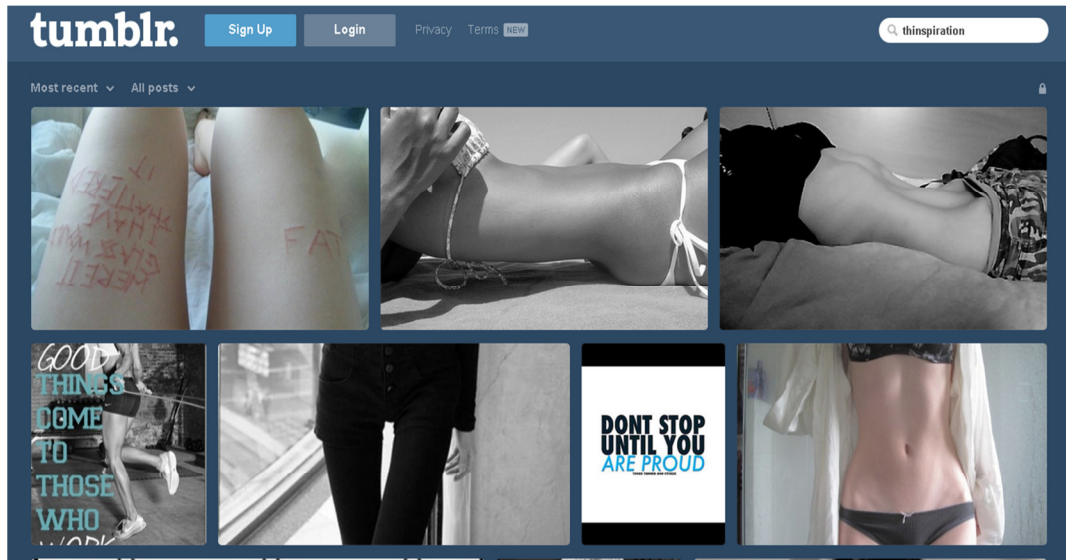
Although Foucault has argued that the disciplines of the monastery adumbrated those of the Panopticon (Turner 1996, p.141), they nonetheless differ, for those of the Panopticon work to increase both utility under capitalism and 'the mastery of each individual over his own body' (Foucault 1979, p.137). The pro-ana 'worker' does not engage in such drudgery out of religious service to God, rather she does so in the hope of realising the body she desires. In the process, she draws on normative beauty practices. Hence, the contemporaneous synthesis of hard-work and the pursuit of the body beautiful has led Simon J. Williams to suggest that 'the boundaries between the ascetic and aesthetic, in this context, become blurred' (2003, p.33).

However, pain is constructed in diverse ways in pro-ana online spaces. This is illustrated by a 'thinspiration' search on Tumblr which yields an amalgamation of posts featuring self-harm, emaciated bodies, and motivational slogans (see figure 20 below). These varying understandings of weight loss have all been posted by different users but are united by the hashtag 'thinspiration'. For some, as the top left image shows, the quest for thinness has led to self-punishment, to literally abusing one's body by carving into it. This user punishes herself by inscribing 'fat' on her right thigh. This can be read as a perverse reference to Franz Kafka's penal colony where 'the condemned man has

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<sup>33</sup> Jones describes a similar discourse taking place in makeover television whereby '[cosmetic surgery] is removed from vanity and narcissism and becomes something that requires motivation, something that tough and hardy people with a strong ethic of self-improvement consider: it becomes an act of courage, bravery and self-determination' (2008, pp.53-54).

the commandment he has transgressed inscribed on his body with the harrow' (1992, p.131). In this thinspiration post though, the transgression itself is engraved into the woman's body. Still, the outcome is the same: both the condemned man and the self-punishing woman have their sentence emblazoned across their body, and for the pro-anorectic, being fat is the heaviest sentence of all.



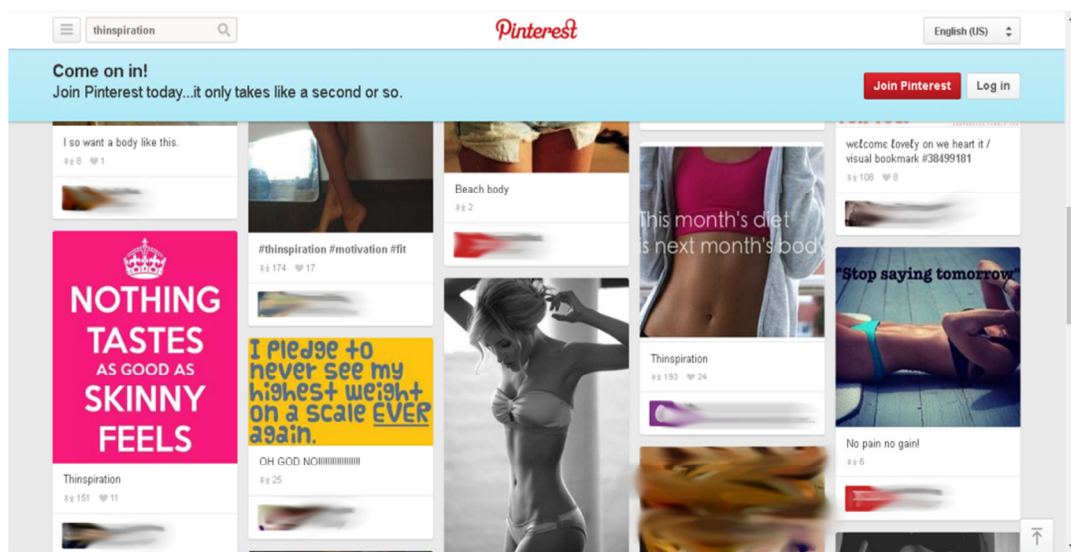
**Figure 20:** posts generated by a search for 'thinspiration' on Tumblr.

On the same user's left thigh she has inscribed 'Were it glass would I have shattered it', a quote from the song '35' by American alternative band La Dispute. The song itself centres on the narrator observing the collapse of the world around them, reiterating: 'Wires snap/ Concrete gives/ Metal twisting and/ Everything tumbling' ('La dispute "35"'). The song depicts disintegration and despair, clearly fitting for the angst-ridden pro-ana user. Nonetheless her invoking of the line 'Were it glass would I have shattered it', also operates to express her concerns about her weight, she is 'fat' and therefore, her weight will shatter glass. The pain this user feels is at not being thin enough, something she has turned upon herself in the act of self-laceration. This particular post is more closely tied to those of the grunge genre discussed in the previous chapter.

Conversely, the post beneath this draws on the upbeat rhetoric of self-help, stating that 'Good things come to those who work'. This statement appears to be a modification of the popular proverb, 'All things come to those who wait', which suggests that patience brings rewards (Simpson and Speake 2009a). Replacing 'wait' with 'work' illustrates the extent to which work has pervaded all areas of life under late capitalism: one cannot simply sit and wait, one must work for one's destiny, whatever the cost. Indeed Scarry, arguing along the lines of Foucault (although she does not draw on Foucault), suggests that work itself is a form of pain, 'a diminution of pain: the *aversive intensity* of pain becomes in work *controlled discomfort*' (1985, p.171, emphasis in original). The pro-ana user who transforms the pain of anorexia into work on the self is able to render it worthwhile, hence, '*controlled discomfort*'. However, the 'good things' the user hopes to acquire through 'work' will almost certainly never materialise, for the toil to achieve the ideal self is ultimately 'a laborious fiction' (McGee 2005, p.174). This is reinforced by the statement 'don't stop until you are proud', yet such pride rarely seems to manifest unless one's body is as emaciated as those in the remaining images on figure 20, a state which requires constant suffering and maintenance.

Even so, pain is often presented as something users actively and happily undergo, rather than that to which they passively and miserably submit. As I suggested in earlier chapters, pro-ana posts generated on Pinterest tend to be the most buoyant in tone, focusing as they do on motivating users. They frame pain as a necessary investment should one want to reap the rewards of the ideal body. This is exemplified by the Pinterest thinspiration search indicated below (figure 21). The posts here evoke the extent to which the hard work and suffering to be thin are necessary to achieve the ideal body. The first post on the left reproduces supermodel Kate Moss's infamous statement, 'Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels' (her response when asked in an interview if she had any mottos) which led to public condemnation and outrage (Wardrop 2009). As one might expect, this quote appears regularly in pro-ana online

spaces, its implications being that no food can bring as much pleasure as can being skinny. This is reinforced by the post second from the right on figure 21: 'This month's diet is next month's body', emblazoned across the body of a slim and toned woman. Such statements serve as a reminder that the work one does in the present will bring future prosperity, and as the post on the far right commands, 'Stop saying tomorrow', beneath which reads the caption, 'No pain no gain!'. These posts are unforgiving and suggest that there is no excuse not to diet and exercise; if you want the ideal body, sacrifices must be made.



**Figure 21:** posts generated by a search for 'thinspiration' on Pinterest.

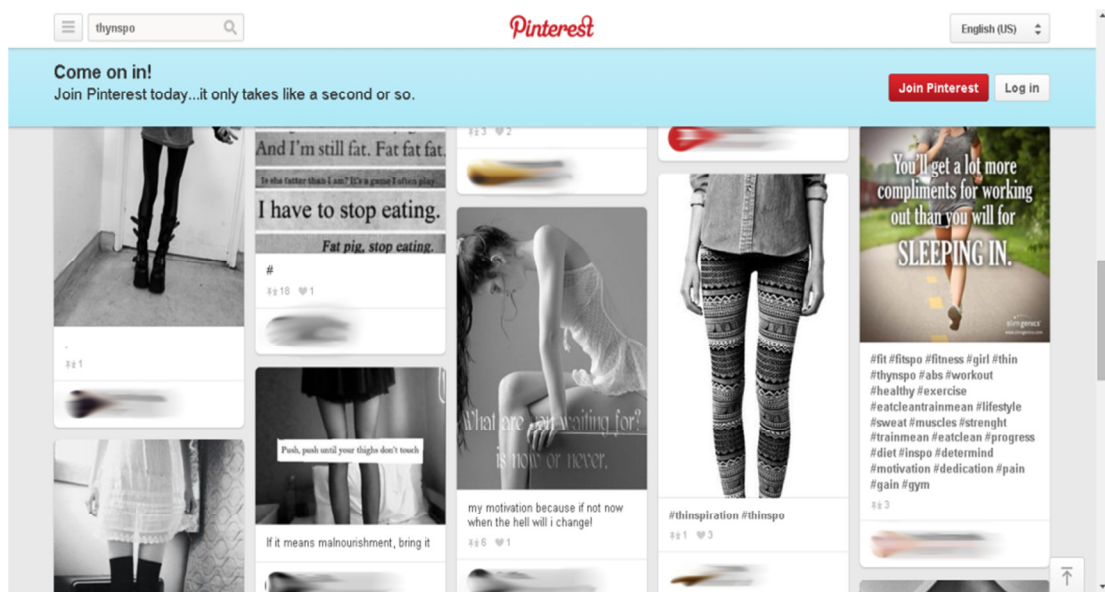
The sentiment of 'no pain no gain' may find its roots in austere Puritan practices, but today, it is simply another tenet of compulsory self-improvement. It has permeated 'everyday parlance to describe that desirable results require undesirable associated by-products, such as in the finance sector (Pain 2009) and education (Rendón et al.1998)' (Kramer et al 2012, p.518). The problem with such a motto is that it can simply become a means of justifying even the most undignified suffering (Kilwein 1989). The pro-ana user who welcomes the deterioration of her body in order to achieve ideal thinness is perpetuating this discourse.

The term itself dates back to 1577 when it appeared in British poet Nicholas Breton's *Works of Young Wit* as: 'They must take pain that look for any gayn' (Simpson and Speake 2009b), suggesting one must endure pain, if one wishes to profit. It entered popular culture when it was adopted by Jane Fonda as her exercise slogan in 1982 to suggest that physical pain was necessary in order to achieve bodybuilding success (Kramer et al 2012, p.518). Fonda's use of the term made pain and gain about bodily improvement. On a superficial level, Fonda claimed to resist cultural norms of femininity and she urged other women to do so too (Spitzack 1993, p.17). However, her claims to resistance ultimately fell short, in that her espousal of a 'near-fatless ideal correspond[ed] to an archetypical male body' (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994, p.12). Therefore, 'no pain, no gain' in this context can be interpreted to suggest that if women do not undergo the pain attendant with achieving the taut and toned body, they will never reap the gains which here come to stand in for the Freudian 'lack'<sup>34</sup> with which they have been blighted. Fonda was able to gain legitimacy by reworking masculine discourses which value strength and muscle definition over softness and curves whilst still maintaining a feminine appearance. She therefore embraced the contradictory demands of femininity which require 'women to embody the "masculine" values of the public arena' whilst also being femininely attractive (Bordo 2003, p.173). Ultimately, this merely underlines cultural understandings of femininity as inadequate.

Fonda's legacy persists in the pro-ana online spaces examined. A 'thynspo' search on Pinterest yields numerous images and text which clearly state that pain is equated with gain (see figure 22 below). For instance, the image on the far right light-heartedly cautions the reader, 'You'll get a lot more compliments for working out than you will for sleeping in'. It juxtaposes the disciplined, slim, early-riser who will be admired, with the lazy, undoubtedly overweight, late sleeper who will probably be ignored. The

<sup>34</sup> In his short essay, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', Freud narrates the moment the girl child compares her genitalia to that of the boy, and in seeing his penis, 'perceives that she has "come off badly" and she feels this as a wrong done to her and as a ground for inferiority' ([1924] 1991, p.320). Put differently, women in the realisation that they do not have a penis, according to Freud, come to understand their gender in terms of deficiency or lack.

imperative to exercise and work upon one's body is once again presented as a moral obligation (see Bordo 2003, p.192). The hashtags accompanying this post are serious in tone. As well as alluding to health and fitness, they invoke the determination with which the user is pursuing an ideal body: '#eatcleantrainmean #lifestyle #sweat #muscles #strenght [sic] #trainmean #eatclean #progress #diet #inspo #determind [sic] #motivation #dedication #pain #gain #gym'. She reiterates the need to train 'mean', thereby evoking a no-nonsense approach to exercise. She also invokes 'sweat', 'muscles' and 'strength'. Her approach to weight loss then, more closely echoes the language of masculine bodybuilding (see Heywood 1998) than the language of feminine loveliness discussed in the previous chapter. Consequently, pro-anorexia online spaces illustrate a conflict between active, masculine, and passive, feminine forms of body disciplining, and active and passive forms of pain.



**Figure 22:** posts resulting from a search for 'thynspo' on Pinterest.

The images in figure 22 emphasise the desirability of very thin legs, and as the text on the image on the bottom row, second from left, reads ‘Push, push until your thighs don’t touch’. The user here suggests that by working incredibly hard one will be thin enough to realise the sought-after thigh gap. However, the implication is that this can be achieved not through exercise as the physicality of ‘push, push’ suggests, but through



self-starvation as the user's comment below indicates: 'If it means malnourishment, bring it'. This user thus frivolously acknowledges that there is a correlation between illness and realising the body they want.

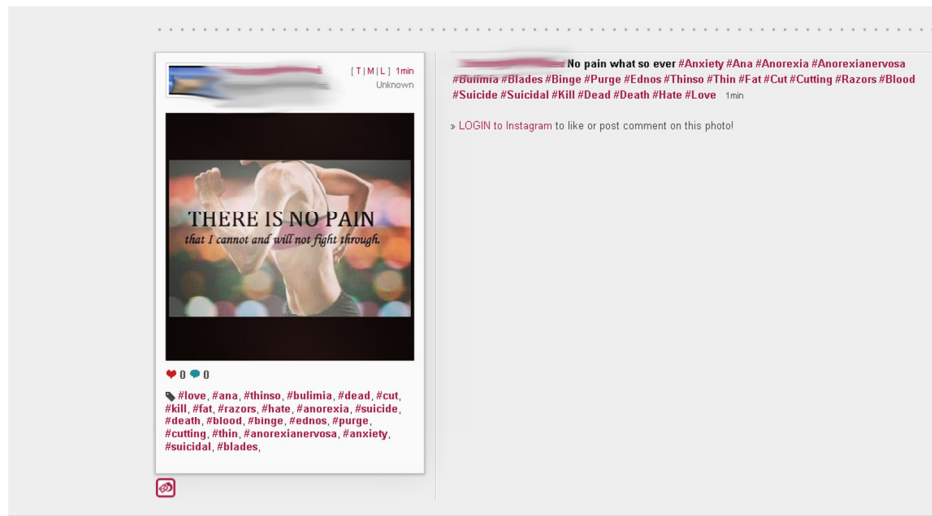
Pro-ana users communicate the importance of losing weight at any cost. The blogger whose tagline reads, 'I don't care if it hurts, I want to have control' (*Fallen Ana* 2010) may be referencing the lyrics to *Creep* by alternative indie-rock band Radiohead (Yorke 1992), but she also expresses the extent to which her life is consumed by a pain she believes to be necessary. In her blog, she advises users to take cold showers and even suggests that they try to 'confuse' their metabolism into burning more calories (*Fallen Ana* 2010). In the data examined, users often described themselves in a battle to subdue the desires of the body. When one Instagram user posts in despair of her 'fat legs' and her yearning for a gap between her thighs, a fellow user writes her a stirring poem to inspire her not to give up (#thinspoooo). She reiterates throughout the poem that the user is strong, but that this strength can only come from her: 'you're strongest when you stand alone [...] there's nothing you can't do'. This trope of the individual on a solitary quest occurs throughout these spaces.

Figure 23 below from a #ana search on Instagram features a user's declaration that 'There is no pain that I cannot and will not fight through', a statement which echoes the 'militaristic and warrior analogies' used in bodybuilding (Fussell 1991 and Saltman 2003 cited in Bunsell 2013, p.118-119). The lexis here is resolute in tone and suggests that the user is in battle with her body. Conversely, the hashtags accompanying this post, such as '#bulimia #dead #cut #kill' do not imply that the user is *building* her body, rather that she is destroying it. However, she constructs her approach to pain as noble. Here, she is more the agentic edgeworker (Gailey 2009)<sup>35</sup> seeking 'embodied morality'

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<sup>35</sup> Gailey defines edgework thus: 'According to Lyng (1990, p. 857), edgework includes activities that involve a "clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence"' (Gailey 2009, p.95)

through her extraordinary experiences (Gooldin 2008), than a passive sufferer whose pain has been externally imposed.



**Figure 23:** a post generated by a search for #ana on Instagram.

The pro-ana users examined in this study discuss their anorexic experience in language which combines hard work and suffering with pleasure and a sense of achievement. Some even describe starvation in terms of a chemical high. In a discussion on the sense of purity gained from fasting, one user on *Pro-ana for Me* refers to the elation she feels as well as the strong sense of achievement:

When I fast I feel great, I love it – that feeling of emptiness. I feel there is nothing bad in me, no toxins, fats, chemicals. I feel clean and pure and great, even before the fasting high kicks in. And I feel proud of myself. I have hunger pains but they give me a sense of validation. They reaffirm that I’m succeeding. Even if there was zero calorie food, I still reckon I’d eat nothing and endure the pain. (‘fasting’ 2014)

This user attests to loving the feeling of being able to subsist without food for so long but, she also feels ‘proud’ and a ‘sense of validation’ from the discomfort of hunger. Strictly speaking, she may be suffering, but she reads this as a sign of success. Other users concur, responding with statements such as ‘I love the high I get from fasting’ and ‘On day 2 I’m euphoric’ (ibid.).

Such feelings of elation are not uncommon in anorexia and it has been argued that some individuals even become addicted to starvation (Brumberg 1988, p.39). Notwithstanding, as Bordo argues, 'whatever the physiology involved, the ways in which the subject understands and thematises her experience cannot be reduced to a mechanical process' (2003, p.180). The anorectic may indeed be addicted to the sensations of starvation, but it is cultural understandings of the female body which frame these feelings as indicative of success and moral purity. Another user in this thread describes fasting thus: 'I feel clean and another indescribable feeling, like fasting is right. If I eat I feel dirty, guilty and fat'. These users may feel ecstatic highs from starving, but its alternative is couched in uncleanness and guilt.

Pro-ana marketing sites exploit these feelings of impurity and depression. *Pro Thinspiration* which promotes its own diet book, features a testimonial from the author who emphasises the 'pain' and 'suffering' caused by being overweight and suggests that the book can provide salvation:

I promised myself that I would help others *suffering* from the same overweight problems like me. I committed to myself that what I would not let others *suffers* [sic] from what I suffered. I will show them the way out... They can easily follow my footprints and *come out of that dark life*. I knew that I could talk to these women and inspire them to start taking steps towards *a new life* because I had been in their shoes. I knew the *pain and the depression* that those extra pounds bring with them... So I wanted to help change others going through same *pain* and wanted to *bring them back to life*. (2014, emphases added)

Echoing my earlier discussion of the religious anorectic, weight loss here is described in terms of spiritual enlightenment, as having the potential to save the wretched from darkness. The verb to suffer occurs three times in this testimony and on many more occasions throughout the site. The author implies that, in being overweight, one is not truly alive. By implication, following this diet book will restore life, and a better one at that. Such a testimonial is evangelical in tone, but as Mary G. Winkler notes, 'when we speak of faith and virtue in the context of physical improvement, we have entered a thought world where the subject is thoroughly secular but the language is that of

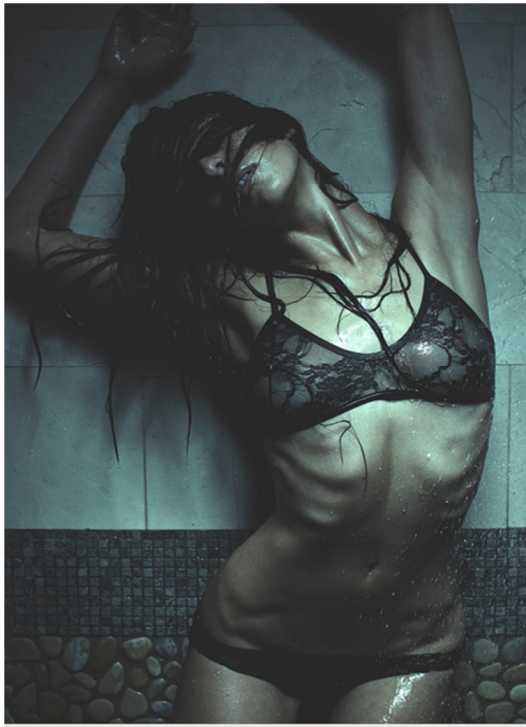
morality and theology' (1994, p.217). Thus, not only is the rhetoric of pro-ana lexis co-opted to sell diet books, so is that of religious salvation.

The narrative of *Pro Thinspiration* is not unique to pro-ana culture. It echoes those of makeover shows such as *Ten Years Younger* which follow a 'submerged, quasi-religious discourse of ritual abjection and redemption' whereby women undergo an image overhaul comprising cosmetic surgery and new clothes in order to shuffle off the unsightliness of their former selves and emerge as an acceptable form of femininity (Tincknell 2011, p.93; see also Jones 2008; Wearing 2007). The surgery administered by *Ten Years Younger*, and the diet advice meted out by *Pro Thinspiration* may cause immense pain, but the postfeminist makeover paradigm teaches us that nothing is as painful as being physically unattractive. Ultimately then, pro-ana online spaces may emphasise the pain involved in extreme dieting, but they invariably articulate their suffering in such a way that it coincides with the compulsory pain required of the ideal postfeminist subject.

### **Exposing the pain of normative femininity**

Having explored how pro-ana users convert the pain of anorexia into a worthwhile experience which comes with the reward of normative femininity, I now turn to the ways in which they might enact resistance. As a number of posts above indicated, pro-ana users do not always blindly accept the thin ideal. Many express rage at its impossibility, and in so doing, expose uncomfortable truths about thinness culture. Such discontent can operate as a basis for political action, therefore, in this section, I ask if through their accounts of suffering to be skinny, these women are creating 'pockets of resistance' (Bartky 1990, p.81). A number of posts in the sample included images that users denounce, such as those depicting women in stages of undress and in eroticised poses, where the discussion or accompanying hashtags are anything but erotic. Here, I will interrogate the potential for meaningful critique in such posts.

As I demonstrated in chapter three, the subreddit, *thinspirationpics* eroticises and appraises the skinny female body. A discussion thread and accompanying image entitled 'All that glitters' (figure 24 below) typifies the images posted to this space and reflects the way in which pornography, and a particularly violent style of pornography, is widespread in mainstream culture (cf. Wolf 1991, p.136). It echoes the everyday pornographic traits described by Gill (2009, p.94): semi-naked, the woman's back is arched, her body thrust forward; her pose is one of simulated orgasm. The image evokes a troubling conflation of sexual pleasure and violence, yet in the Barthesian sense, it is also polysemous: this woman could have thrown her head back in desire, but equally, she could have been forced against the wall. Her eyes are obscured which intensifies the opacity.



**Figure 24:** a post entitled 'All that glitters' from subreddit, *thinspirationpics*.

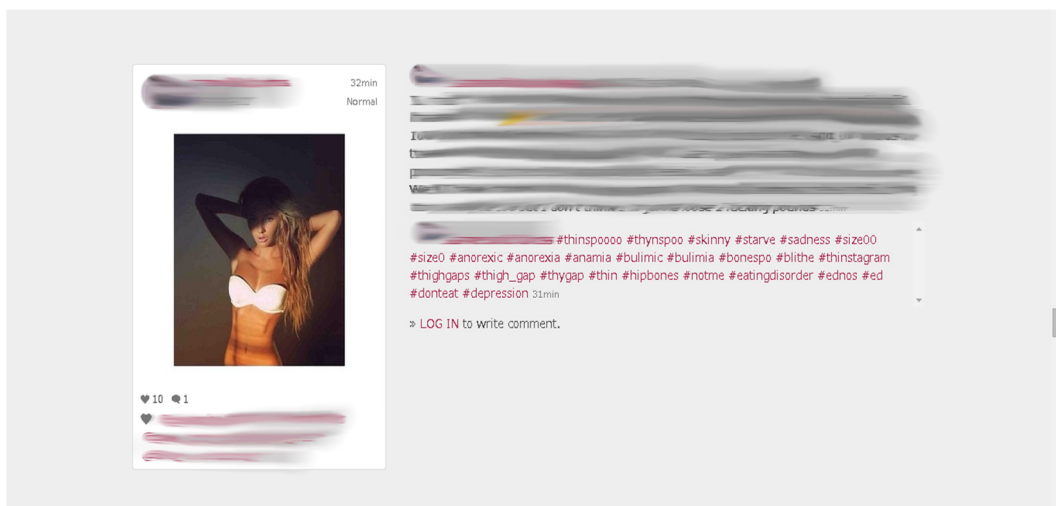
From a postfeminist perspective this image evokes feminine power: it can be read as a woman who is in control of her body and her sexuality, at the same time though, her ribs are exposed, her bones jut and her sinews are visible. Her skin is damp and the tiled surroundings suggest she is in a shower, however, the blue and grey lighting

evokes coldness and is resonant of death: a body outstretched in a morgue. Either way, this image eroticises the [pro-]anorexic body, and in so doing, it reproduces the cultural trope of female suffering. As Rosalind Coward notes, 'not only do [such images] reinforce ideologies of sexuality as female submission to male force, but they also powerfully re-circulate the connection between sexuality and death which is so cruelly played out in our society' (1982, p.18). The woman in figure 24 reinforces such a connection, evoking simultaneously sexiness and violent morbidity.

The title of the image, 'All that glitters', however, complicates such meanings. It appears to refer to the woman's skin, which shimmers in its dampness, and it is also an elliptical variation of the oft-quoted line from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: 'All that glisters is not gold' ([1600]1997, II.VII, 65). In the play, suitor to Portia, the Prince of Morocco unwisely chooses the golden casket and instead of winning Portia's hand, he is met with a written scroll which he reads aloud, 'All that glisters is not gold' (ibid.); in other words, not everything is as it seems. The *thinspirationpics* user, in applying this quote to the image of an emaciated woman, suggests that although she may outwardly gleam, her reality is more sombre. Furthermore, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Morocco subsequently states, 'Gilded [tombs] do worms infold' (II.VII, 69), suggesting that even if one rests in a golden vault, the ultimate fate is the same for all: to be eaten by worms. Whether wittingly or not, pro-ana users acknowledge the immense pain, and even fatality, in maintaining extreme thinness. However, the critique invariably falters at this point. Users may expose the harsh reality of thinness culture, but in the moment where this might be used to mobilise resistance, they turn the critique on themselves.

This is demonstrated in a 'bonespo' search on Instagram (figure 25, below). It depicts an image of a slim, tanned girl in a state of undress, accompanied by a short description of how she is feeling, along with the mandatory hashtags. The description of the user's emotional state however is at odds with the image posted: a young

woman posing suggestively; her lips are parted and her arms are behind her head as if to invite the viewer to look upon her; the shadow across her face drawing the viewer to focus on her body. Her tanned skin is accentuated by a white top, which could either be a bikini or her underwear, the ambiguity of which surely has the intention of titillation. However, the text accompanying this image is far from sensual. The author's username, 'hungertilithurts' references starvation and pain so as to display the magnitude of her weight-loss ambition. She indicates that her current weight is just over seven and a half stone. The ensuing text is an expression of her anger and frustration at not having lost enough weight, despite, as she suggests, not eating.



**Figure 25:** a post produced by a search for #bonespo on Instagram.

She rages: 'I don't fucking get how can I put on weight when I eat fucking nothing?? I just feel like cutting the fat off [...] I hate myself and there is nothing to purge!' The user is wracked with self-hatred and anger that she has gained weight despite apparently having not eaten. She assigns a number of hashtags to her post to reinforce how she is feeling:

#thinspoooo #thynspoo #skinny #starve #sadness #size00  
 #size0 #anorexic #anorexia #anania #bulimic #bulimia #bonespo #blithe #thinstagram  
 #thighgaps #thigh\_gap #thygap #thin #hipbones #notme #eatingdisorder  
 #ednos #ed #donteat #depression.

These tags range from spelling variations of *thinspo*, the user's desire for a thigh gap, the sadness and depression she is experiencing, and a hashtag often used in pro-ana spaces: 'notme'. The regular deployment of #notme in these spaces is instructive: it is used on social media to signal that an image posted does not depict the user posting it. In this context, however, it also functions to expose the gulf between idealised standards of beauty and the way users perceive themselves. In this post, the user directs her anger at herself, but it might be more usefully directed at the impossibility of achieving "woman as image", forever unattainable, always invoking a sense of lack' (Stacey cited in Thornham 2007, p.43). Ultimately, the ideal will never be #me, because it is endlessly out of reach.

Another equally-angry Instagram user expresses her despair in a monologue uncharacteristically long for this platform. The user's main source of anger is that her posts are being removed by moderators, and as figure 26 below shows, her diatribe is accompanied by an archetypal pro-ana image: a half-naked emaciated woman, reclining so as to emphasis her exposed ribcage; although she does not make it clear whether or not the image depicts her. The user argues that she only uses this account to 'help' her, and as 'a way to vent', it seems that performing a pro-ana identity online is her way of coping. She rages: 'Don't tell me to go and get help. You try fucking sitting in a psychiatric ward with actual crazy people who don't have a mind of their own! I've been there. Okay I'm depressed and I don't want to be fat but that doesn't mean I'm crazy'. The user differentiates herself from those she deems 'crazy'. Her depression and desire to be thin, she tells us, is not 'crazy'. By accompanying her statement with a posed image, the user suggests she simply wants to be sexy and slim like the woman pictured, and what is so 'crazy' about that? She asserts that her behaviour is normal and, from a postfeminist perspective, she is merely expressing 'healthy signs of unhealthy femininity' (McRobbie 2009, p.96). She is therefore understandably confused



as to why this makes her 'crazy'. Posts such as these have the potential to act as an exposé of the contradictions of 'unhealthy femininity'.



**Figure 26:** a post resulting from a search for #thinspooooo on Instagram.

*Ethereal Anas*, for example, explicitly details what one should expect from the extreme weight loss required of unhealthy femininity. It tells users: 'Cut your hair short, then you won't be so upset when it starts falling out [...] Take comfort in constipation, in being bloated and gassy [...] Halitosis means you are succeeding with anorexia because your gut is rotting' (2009). The author points to the trauma of hair loss, to digestive problems and bad breath, all of which are to be cherished, because they show that the user is successfully losing weight. Femininity is presented as bound, quite literally, to the disintegration of the body: hair falling out and guts rotting. Sadly though, this is not satire. Ironically, as the pro-anorectic becomes closer to disappearing, she nears her goal. Ultimately, although users of these spaces expose the very real pain which ideal thinness requires, even taking pleasure in such suffering, they 'do not undermine the oppressive power of beauty ideals' (Gimlin 2002, p.146).

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the way in which pain is negotiated in pro-ana online spaces. Through an interrogation of the cultural history of female self-starving, it has

shown how pro-anorexia online spaces draw upon discourses of femininity which pre-date the pro-ana phenomenon by centuries. There are striking parallels between the pious women of the medieval period and the pro-anorexic women of these online spaces: both seek to transcend their bodily desires in the name of a force greater than themselves: for the former it is God, for the latter it is the cultural ideal of the slender woman. Both groups of women strive towards an end which is ultimately unattainable.

As the posts analysed show, the pain of anorexia is variously presented as admirable and a means of solidarity with others. Users recount their self-starving experiences to paradoxically distinguish themselves as pro-ana, in so doing they find common ground with a group of women who understand them. The fellowship of pro-anorexia may initially appear strange and perverse to many, however upon closer examination the solidarity these women find echoes that of normative femininity, much of which Bartky (2004, p.23) points out, 'clings to the disciplines'. Western cultural understandings of femininity have taught us that women are supposed to suffer, therefore the phenomenon of pro-anorexia is, regrettably, a logical step in a culture which demands women undergo physically painful procedures in order to be beautiful. If psychopathologies are invariably the crystallisation of what is wrong with a culture (Bordo 2003, p.141) then pro-anorexia is a manifestation of cultural ills *par excellence*.

In the section on 'no pain, no gain', I explored how extreme weight loss is framed as a meaningful investment. Users appropriate discourses of hard work and dedication, and diet and exercise which bring about immense suffering are recommended. This is one way in which pro-ana spaces have been able to legitimise themselves. For, when bodily suffering is presented in terms of a noble quest, it is less likely to appear as pathology. By articulating pro-ana practices in the language of postfeminist neoliberal self-improvement, these spaces are merging with the mainstream. However, in so doing, they are also tacitly revealing the pain of normative femininity.

Therefore, in the final section of this chapter, I asked if users' accounts of pain could be read as an exposé of normative femininity. I explored the way users describe the miserable reality of extreme weight loss. They rage against images of apparently perfect women, hashtagging them with words such as 'not me' and 'depressed'. Although they show the pain involved in achieving the thin ideal, they ultimately turn their suffering inwards, blaming themselves for never being good enough. The documenting of pain in pro-anorexia online spaces may reveal the suffering required of normative femininity, but users themselves do not critique such a culture. What my enquiries show however, is the extraordinary will and commitment of a group of young women who will go to incredible lengths to achieve their goals. If such focus and determination could be harvested for political good, these women could organise a movement to overthrow the culture which insists they suffer.

In the next chapter I explore in detail the potential of pro-ana online spaces to launch a resistance against the culture of compulsory thinness. I ask whether these spaces, which have caused such controversy and prompted calls for censorship, can be considered counterpublics capable of destabilising the status quo, or if on the contrary, they simply reinforce it.

## Chapter 6: From counterhegemonic to counterpublic? The political potential of pro-anorexia

### Introduction

The preceding chapter explored pro-ana users' negotiations of pain, arguing that they draw on cultural representations to communicate their suffering. I suggested that they convert their pain into a neoliberal project of self-improvement which neutralises its potential for meaningful resistance. Nonetheless, as I have pointed out throughout this thesis, pro-ana online spaces are heterogeneous and they are steeped in contradictions. On the one hand they resist societal understandings of anorexia as an illness, yet on the other, they conform to the requirements of normative femininity. Recognising the potential for resistance within such a paradox, this chapter examines pro-ana online spaces' potential as counterpublics. Although they have been framed as controversial, here I ask if these spaces constitute a *movement* capable of enriching the public sphere.

In earlier chapters I addressed the way in which pro-ana online operates as a subcultural space, distinguishing itself from the mainstream via its controversial stance on disordered eating, as well as aligning itself with other subcultures such as the grunge and hipster movements. However, this chapter seeks to further interrogate the counterdiscursive tendencies of the pro-ana phenomenon by assessing its potential as a counterpublic. I ask to what extent it is politically useful and if it can lead to a better understanding of, not only anorexia, but the culture of compulsory thinness.

I approach this chapter in two main sections: in the first I explore what it means for a movement to be considered a counterpublic. To do so, I draw on a range of historical and contemporary women-led publics, examining what is involved in the formation of a counterpublic and what might be its limitations. In the second section, I turn to pro-ana

online spaces themselves. Here, I interrogate their counterpublic potential and illustrate how they satisfy some requirements of counterpublics, through for instance, their appropriation of language and their flouting of medical advice. Despite this, I argue that, at the same time, they operate as postfeminist enclaves, thereby lacking the collectivism necessary for a movement to bring about social change. As such, I make a case for what I term, *postfeminist counterpublics*. A postfeminist counterpublic may, in many ways be counterhegemonic, constituting of groups of women who on some levels critique the status quo. However, it is ultimately too rigidly individualistic to destabilise the hegemonic order. Finally, in light of this, I ask if the political potential of pro-ana online spaces might be mined for the greater good.

### **The private, the public, and counterpublics**

For Jürgen Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere operates as a 'sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion' ([1964] 1974, p.50). Crucial to his definition is the notion that 'access is guaranteed to all citizens' (ibid., p.49). However, in practice, participation of persons who do not occupy positions of privilege is not assured. As Habermas notes, it was during the Enlightenment that the notion of the public sphere came to the fore (ibid., p.50) It was also during this period that women, who since the time of Plato, had been associated with the private sphere, were mandated as such (Rose 1993, p.363). Gillian Rose suggests that in the Enlightenment, 'the realm of the public and the political was constructed as one of rationality, individuality, self-control and hence masculinity, since only men could be fully rational individuals, free from passionate attachments' (ibid.). Women, with their irrational temperament and investment in emotions, were not seen as capable of political debate. Therefore, as Warner puts it, in Western culture, if masculinity is conceived of as public, 'femininity is a language of private feeling (2005, p.24).

This enduring dichotomy underpins contemporary understandings of women's relative invisibility in politics, where 'if politics is assumed to be the prerogative of the public sphere, and women are taken to be firmly located within the private domain, then the access of women to politics would appear to be understandably problematic' (Siltanen and Stanworth 1984, p.195). This means that when political action is undertaken by women there is the tendency to familialise<sup>36</sup> and depoliticise it. Kathleen M. Blee suggests that the reasons for women's apparent 'invisibility' in political protest are threefold: it is borne out of longstanding assumptions of radicalism as essentially male, the limits of where we look for women radicals (formal settings such as unions and political parties) and how we go about looking (disregarding for example, the domestic arena) (1998, pp.2-5).

Jessica Winegar's (2012) research into the Egyptian revolution in 2011 corroborates Blee's claims: she suggests that women's protest is often drawn from the private sphere or based on domestic tasks, skills and expertise, and is therefore not recognised as political. In Egypt, it was the women who held the communities together: they cooked for male protesters and looked after the children; whilst the men were on the streets of Tahrir assuming the 'iconic image of the revolutionary [...] typically raising a fist, throwing a rock, or standing in front of tanks' (Winegar 2012, p.67). That is to say, cultural understandings of political protest favour this latter image over that of hidden domestic labour which is no less important in the staging of a social movement.

As a result of the invisibilising of women's protest and their marginalisation in the public sphere, the work of Habermas has been criticised by feminists such as Rita Felski (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1990; 2013), and by queer theorist, Michael Warner (2002; 2005). All three scholars make a case for counterpublics. Felski condemns the gender

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<sup>36</sup> I borrow the term 'familialise' from Fraser. In her 1990 essay on the public sphere she argues that, 'the rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or *familializing* them; it casts these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contra-distinction to public, political matters' (p.71, emphasis added).

'blindness' of the bourgeois public sphere and its patriarchal bias (1989, p.165). She argues instead for counterpublics which 'seek to define themselves *against* the homogenizing and universalizing logic of the global megaculture of modern mass communication' (1989, p.166, emphasis in original). Fraser concurs, calling for 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1990, p.67). Counterpublics are necessary for ensuring that the voices of the marginalised are heard in the public sphere. Therefore, instead of a single overarching sphere, scholars of counterpublics advocate for multiple publics (Asen 2000; Felski 1989; Fraser 1990; Warner 2002, 2005).

### **A case study approach**

In order to contextualise how counterpublics both come into being and fall away, I will now undertake a case-study analysis of a set of historical and contemporary women-led spaces. I examine four diverse case studies with the intention of illustrating how different counterpublics operate: lesbian separatism, SlutWalk, *Mumsnet*, and Toxic Links Coalition's (TLC) resistance of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month (NBCAM). Lesbian separatism, which emerged out of 1970s radical feminism, is an example of counterpublic withdrawal from the mainstream, and SlutWalk which first took place in 2011, follows the activist tradition of occupying public space. *Mumsnet*, by contrast, is an online discussion forum where parents come together to talk about parenting issues as well as lobbying politicians. Finally, TLC's resistance of NBCAM illustrates the importance of the existence of multiple publics, rather than the binary of public and counterpublic.

Each of the spaces discussed is on some level counterhegemonic, even if they do not fully succeed as counterpublics. I follow Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony as outlined by Raymond Williams. Hegemony is not fixed, rather it is a process which 'has

continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own' (Williams 1977, p. 112). This means that any group which exhibits counterhegemonic tendencies is in a pivotal position whereby it always risks incorporation by the hegemonic. If incorporation is resisted, a counterpublic is potentially formed. But, as Raymond Williams points out,

all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. (1977, p. 114)

Whilst a successful counterpublic must retain links with the wider public, it cannot dissolve into it. At the same time, for Fraser, 'the concept counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is *publicist*' (1990, p.67, emphasis in original). This leads me to the first case study, lesbian separatism.

### **Lesbian separatism**

To understand lesbian separatism, it is necessary to return to radical feminism, which I outlined briefly in chapter two of this thesis. It was from radical feminism that lesbian separatism emerged. Radical feminism developed because:

During the middle 1960s, women in the civil rights movement and its offshoots were becoming aware that, even in groups dedicated to human liberation, they were second-class members – useful at the typewriter, in the kitchen, and in bed, but expected to leave policy making to men. (Deckard 1983, p.326)

This new movement was incredibly powerful, but a number of groups of women felt they were not being represented – for instance working class and lesbian women (Echols 1989, p.203). This led to the formation of a group who named themselves 'Radicalesbians' (Deckard 1983, p.341). They refused marginalisation and through their staging of protests, they ensured that, by September 1971, the National Organization for Women had recognised the legitimacy of lesbian women's oppression (Deckard 1983, p.343). In spite of the achievements of lesbian feminists, the lesbian



separatist groups which emerged concurrently were only partly successful as counterpublics.

Having experienced discrimination in the women-only communities which had been established to provide a haven from patriarchal oppression, some lesbian groups had started their own collectives where they bought land, ran women-only bookstores and restaurants, and produced newspapers (Shugar 1995, p.57). Their withdrawal from patriarchal society was undoubtedly a powerful, symbolic statement; but their spaces became enclaves 'where patriarchy was evaded rather than engaged. Concomitantly, the focus became one of personal rather than social transformation' (Echols 1989, p.5). Marilyn Frye (1997) argues that all types of feminism are invariably constituted by separatism, a withdrawal from male-dominated spaces. The act of separating is a necessary phase in the formation of a counterpublic. Nevertheless, a counterpublic's success relies upon its 'dual character' (Fraser 1990, p.68): Janus-like, it must both separate from the wider public sphere and seek to re-join it, all the while resisting incorporation. The lesbian separatists however, were more focused on withdrawal than regrouping.

Living a separatist lifestyle required a number of privileges; moving to a collective was not possible for all women, particularly for those who had dependents and bills to pay. As a result, 'separatist ideology itself often appeared elitist or arrogantly middle-class' (Shugar 1995, p.49). It amounted to an exclusive community who contributed to the double oppression of certain groups of women, particularly the poor and non-white, who were not only subordinated by the patriarchy, but by other women. In short, lesbian separatists' failure to address intersectional marginalisation contributed to the movement's downfall. Writing on her experiences of living in a radical feminist community during the 1980s, Kathy Rudy (2001) notes that it was the collective's singular approach to lesbianism and its debarring of complex identities which led to her disillusionment with the movement and subsequent departure. Namely, it operated

under the spurious belief that all women are united by dint of being women, an approach which obfuscates intersectional inequalities (Bryson 2003, p.170-171). Ironically then, lesbian separatism risked replicating the tenets of the bourgeois public sphere which is characterised by an indifference to inequality and the false belief that everyone's views are being represented (Felski 1989, p.165).

Lesbian separatism is an example of a counterhegemonic group which ultimately fell short of succeeding as a counterpublic movement. In its formation of a separatist space, instead of creating a haven for the oppressed, it established another elite group which overlooked the complexities of oppression and favoured the privileged (as I argued of pro-ana online spaces in chapter four). For a counterpublic to succeed, it must engage with wider publics if it is to bring about real social change. Crucially it must seek to be 'transformative, not replicative merely' (Warner 2002, p.88), or else it merely risks reproducing the hegemonic inequalities it set out to counter. This brings me to the next case study: SlutWalk; a phenomenon which has been widely criticised by feminists for its lack of inclusivity.

### **SlutWalk**

In January 2011, during a routine address to law students on personal safety, Toronto police officer Michael Sanguinetti stated that women might prevent being victimised if they avoided dressing like sluts (SlutWalk Toronto Facebook 2011). His victim-blaming comments prompted outrage and in April of that year, two women, Heather Jarvis and Sonya Barnett, established SlutWalk Toronto in response (Nguyen 2013, p.159). This was only the beginning, and by the end of 2011, 'SlutWalks were organized in over 100 cities in 40 nations, mobilizing tens of thousands of women, men, and children' (Mendes 2015, p.219). SlutWalk exemplifies a movement which quickly gained momentum and, in principle, had a global covering. In their mission to reclaim the term 'slut', participants marched with placards to declare that rape was the fault of the perpetrator and not the victim. Some protesters wore casual jeans and t-shirts,

whereas others wore more revealing attire to emphasise their cause (Pilkington 2011). However, this focus on a woman's right to freedom of fashion arguably misses the point.

SlutWalk has been widely criticised by the mainstream media and feminists alike. It has been condemned for furthering the notion that women and girls are sexual objects, for being heteronormative, and above all, for neglecting issues of race and nationality (Dow and Wood 2014). However, scholars including Keren Darmon (2014), Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood (2014), Kaitlynn Mendes (2015), and Tram Nguyen (2013) agree that the responses to SlutWalk were more telling about the conflicts within contemporary feminism than was the march itself. Specifically Darmon cites the postfeminist mass media as the reason why SlutWalks were so badly received (2014). At the same time, Nguyen suggests that

many of the participants appeared to work within the postfeminist and Third Wave model insofar as they performed fierceness by revelling in female sexual power as end games [thereby] ultimately displac[ing] the somber and deadly issues of rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and street harassment.' (2013, pp.159-160)

Unfortunately though, SlutWalk overlooked the fact that sexual assault takes place in countries where women are legally required to conceal their bodies. Occurring at the backdrop of public rape of a student in Delhi in 2012, 'SlutWalks were cast by some as nothing more than a Western import that had no relevance to the brutalized and victimized body sprawled across the Indian street (Dhillon 2011, cited in Kapur 2014, p.10)

It is because of these limitations that the phenomenon did not translate cross-culturally. David Greetham (2011) and Ratna Kapur (2012; 2014) have interrogated its reception in an Indian context. Greetham notes that the term slut was only really recognised by a small minority of upper-class Indian women and consequently when removed from its Western context, a SlutWalk could not hold the same meanings as it did in the west

(2011, p.719). As a result, its political potential was somewhat limited. In spite of this, Kapur, who acknowledges the failings of SlutWalk and the 'Pink Chaddi Campaign',<sup>37</sup> suggests they hold value in that they constitute crucial moments in feminist history which allow for a reassessment of the most pressing issues (2012, p.3).

Differently put, rather than simply criticising SlutWalk for its failure to establish a successful feminist social movement, we might utilise it as a springboard to ask what these protests can usefully tell us about contemporary feminism (Dow and Wood 2014; Kapur 2012; Mendes 2015). Dow and Wood urge us 'to recognize that feminism may never be able to speak for all women at all times' (2014, p.37). Mendes argues that although feminism may have been ignored or derided in media reporting around SlutWalks, there was also evidence of feminist rhetoric being adopted without being directly referenced, thus suggesting the extent to which it has penetrated public consciousness, even if it is not always practised (2015, p.227). SlutWalks then, may not constitute a successful counterpublic movement in and of themselves, but they represent valuable lessons in feminist organising. As Felski (1989, p.166) reminds us, counterpublics are 'multiple and heterogeneous and do not converge to form a single revolutionary moment'.

Ultimately, and similar to the lesbian separatists, SlutWalk excluded those without privilege and personalised the political. At the same time though, it was victim to the current postfeminist climate which neutralised its politics, something to which all contemporaneous women-led publics are subject. As I argued above, women's protest has long been undermined. For instance, the act of fasting, when enacted by women has historically been framed as private and for religious or familial gain, whereas fasting performed by men has been conceived of as a public, political act (Bynum 1987, p.192). Further, during a student hunger strike held at Columbia University in

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<sup>37</sup> 'Pink Chaddi Campaign' (a nonviolent protest movement) arose in response to the violent attack and molesting of young women in a pub in Mangalore, a port city in South India in 2009, by a group of Hindu Right wing activists (Kapur 2012, p.2)

2007, charges of anorexia were used to undercut the women's protest and void its politics (Hall 2008). When it is a woman who is protesting, her actions are all too easily reduced to the personal or the pathological and divested of their politics.

The next case study, *Mumsnet*, takes a different approach to depoliticising. It reveals how counterhegemonic spaces are susceptible to professionalisation and co-opting by mainstream politics, both of which render them part of the hegemonic order rather than at odds with it.

### ***Mumsnet***

According to its website, Justine Roberts founded *Mumsnet* in 2000 in order to create an online space for parents to exchange advice (Mumsnet 2015). It is now 'the UK's biggest network for parents, generating over 70 million page views and over 14 million visits per month' (ibid.). *Mumsnet* clearly states that it is a business and is funded primarily by advertising; however it claims not to be motivated solely by profit, specifying that it will not accept funding from ethically-dubious companies such as Nestle, nor will it use payday-loan advertising (ibid.). Nonetheless, this ambivalently political statement is succeeded by a disclaimer to state: 'Mumsnet is a community and is not a lobby group. We are independently funded and have no particular political axe to grind' (ibid.). Although the site endorses the boycotting of Nestle, it is also careful to communicate its neutrality, thereby presenting a space which is thoughtful and politically-aware enough to satisfy its middle-class audience, yet not radical enough to frighten them away.

Despite its claims to political neutrality, *Mumsnet* has courted online discussion with politicians, two Prime Ministers, and resulted in *The Times* newspaper calling the 2010 election the 'Mumsnet election' (Pedersen and Smithson 2013, p.99). The story of *Mumsnet* reads as one of a grassroots group building momentum and ultimately being

heard at governmental level. Yet, upon further interrogation its cause is revealed to be less progressive. *The Week* claim *Mumsnet* is influential because,

[it] is made up of what our leaders consider to be their perfect audience: people just like them, self-selected middle-class parents and former professionals who read the *Guardian* or the *Times* and can hold a conversation about politics for five minutes or longer. (O'Neill 2010)

Scholarly research corroborates claims to *Mumsnet*'s elitism, with Sarah Pederson and Janet Smithson (2013) noting that its users hold higher educational achievement and income than the users of other parenting sites such as Netmums whom Mumsnetters are said to openly deride. The site may have provided a space for support and advice for parents, but only a select group is welcomed. It is therefore important to note that 'women's involvement in cultural production is no automatic determinant of a feminist orientation' (Coleman and Ross 2010, 88). *Mumsnet* may invoke carefully adopted counter-discourses, such as their stance on Nestle, but their politics are ultimately conservative.

Founder Justine Roberts' telling remarks on motherhood in an interview with *The Independent* reinforce this:

The idea of your average mother was that she was a bit thick, terribly insular, and only ever really worried about getting her whites whiter and whether her children were eating their greens. She didn't care about the broader world – economics, politics – and she couldn't properly hold an argument together. But this is prejudice, and one I'm really pleased that Mumsnet refutes. (Duerden 2013)

Ironically, what Roberts illuminates here is prejudice against women who may be less educated than she is, and in her derision of women's domestic labour, she merely shores up the relative importance of men's work in the public sphere. Whilst *Mumsnet*, via Roberts, may believe that the space works to counter common-sense understandings of femininity, it is no less espousing conservative views of gender. As Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera (2007, p.143) point out, a healthy public sphere requires 'counter-discursive groups to be developed into counter-publics and not top-

down interest groups'. As it stands, *Mumsnet* may be ostensibly contributing towards debate, but its traditional values are not enriching the plurality of the public sphere.

Having examined a set of examples which feature counterhegemonic elements but may not fully achieve counterpublic status, I will now explore a case study which exemplifies the way counterhegemonic activity can launch a successful counterpublic movement. In order to demonstrate this, I draw upon Phaedra C. Pezzullo's 2003 research into TLC's resistance of NBCAM.

### **Toxic Links Coalition's resistance of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month**

For over thirty years NBCAM has been held every October to raise awareness of breast cancer and encourage early detection of the disease (Breast Cancer Awareness Month 2015). What is less well known is that it was started by pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca who instigated in-house breast-screening, which whilst effective for early detection, was chiefly a money-saving tactic to prevent loss of workers (Pezzullo 2003, p.351). TLC, the activist group that works to draw attention to the environmental causes of cancer, claims that AstraZeneca, 'profits by first producing many of the toxins implicated in the breast cancer epidemic and then by selling the drugs used to treat the disease' (Pezzullo 2003, p.353). Therefore, in 1997 TLC sought to expose the inherent contradictions in AstraZeneca's sponsorship of NBCAM and raise awareness of the environmental causes of cancer, using the month of October as a springboard. They did this by 'renam[ing] and, thus refram[ing], October as Cancer Industry Awareness Month (instead of NBCAM) in large part by sponsoring annual "Stop Cancer Where It Starts" tours' (Pezzullo 2003, p.354).<sup>38</sup> TLC mobilised the counterhegemonic aspects of NBCAM in order to critique those which supported the status quo; here, the monopolisation of, and damage to, public health by the pharmaceutical industry.

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<sup>38</sup> The 'tours' take the form of TLC directly approaching institutions it believes produce and perpetuate toxic pollution (Pezzullo 2003, p.347).

TLC's critique of NBCAM exemplifies the vulnerability of counterpublics to private and financial interests; once a counterpublic has the backing of a corporation, its mission is no longer fully supporting public interests. This resonates with Habermas' critique of the media in relation to today's public sphere. He argues that 'the process of making public simply serves the arcane policies of special interests; in the form of "publicity" it wins public prestige for people or affairs, thus making them worthy of acclamation in a climate of non-public opinion' (Habermas 1974, p.55). In the case of NBCAM, AstraZeneca has a vested interest in women focussing upon the *signs* of breast cancer rather than the *cause*; the former diverts them from the latter. This is exemplary late capitalist logic whereby the markets are deployed to 'tame politics' (Fraser 2013, p.218). When a counterpublic is co-opted by capitalism, it can be utilised as a means of shoring up the status quo, rather than questioning oppressive structures as originally intended. The public sphere simply becomes 'a field for the competition of interests' (Habermas 1974, p.54).

Breast Cancer Action (which formed part of TLC's resistance to NBCAM) runs the 'think before you pink' project which argues of the emptiness of the Pink Ribbon campaign,<sup>39</sup> suggesting that it 'obscures the harsh reality of breast cancer by creating a single story of triumphant survivorship based on positive thinking, beauty tips, and sanitized, carefully chosen images of women' (Stop the distraction 2015). The Pink Ribbon campaign with its abundance of promotional material and corporate interest operates as a brand itself, one which 'think before you pink' suggests has more benefit to its private sponsors than to women living with breast cancer (Stop the distraction 2015). Through grassroots activism, Breast Cancer Action seeks to expose the exploitative commodification of the counterpublic, and its incorporation into the hegemony.

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<sup>39</sup>The Pink Ribbon campaign promotes the wearing of a pink ribbon in order to raise awareness around breast cancer.



Pezzullo's case study is important to a study of counterpublics because it reveals their complexities. Ostensibly, NBCAM is a counterpublic itself because it challenges the norms around what constitutes the public and the private (cf. Warner 2005, p.31). It seeks to end the silence around breast cancer with the aim of encouraging women to check their breasts so that early detection might increase the success of treatment. This is undoubtedly an important cause, however when the environmental factors highlighted by TLC are taken into account, NBCAM's mission is revealed to be in need of revision.

As such, Pezzullo (2003) argues that publics and counterpublics should not be read as a binary. For instance, by simply situating NBCAM as the counterpublic to a mainstream public indifferent to breast cancer, any criticism of NBCAM is foreclosed. However, in recognising both NBCAM and Cancer Industry Awareness Month as counterpublics, a healthy dialogue can ensue. As Stephen Coleman and Karen Ross argue, 'counterpublics are most likely to be successful when they mobilize diverse networks of social action with a view towards enriching the pluralism of the public sphere' (2010, p.92). This case study reveals the multiplicity of counterpublics in action.

Therefore, it is important to recognise that although TLC reveals the contradictions within NBCAM, this is not to say that Cancer Industry Awareness month is without fault.

As Warner cautions:

we cannot understand counterpublics very well if we fail to see that there are contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of *all* publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations. Counterpublics are publics, too. (2002, p.80)

By examining a set of case studies using theories of counterpublics, I sought to demonstrate the way in which these movements operate, their successes, failings, and their heterogeneity. Ultimately, counterpublics are always at risk of being assimilated into late capitalist neoliberalism, which in its attempts to make more palatable and thus

profit from such movements, voids them of political potency and results in their reinforcing existing hierarchies. Consequently, it is vital that new counterpublics emerge in order that the status quo is continually questioned. As Seyla Benhabib argues, 'all struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered "private," non-public and non-political issues as matters of public concern' (1992, p.100). This requires a reassessment of the public and private, the personal and the political, and women's counterpublics have a long history of doing exactly this. In the next section, I examine pro-ana online spaces in light of counterpublic theory, interrogating their relationship with the hegemonic and their potential to form a counterpublic.

## **Pro-ana online spaces**

### **Pro-ana online spaces as counterhegemonic**

Pro-ana online spaces present an affront to the hegemony in a number of different ways. In the majority of spaces examined in this study, recovery from anorexia was either framed as unwanted or impossible to achieve, meaning that users seek ways of living with anorexia as opposed to treating it and, for some this involves actively embracing it. Consequently, the women in these spaces are taking control of their bodies. At the same time, they refuse censorship, creating their own language in order to do so. In principle, pro-ana online has the potential to launch a counterpublic which could redress contemporary understandings of anorexia. In practice though, pro-ana online culture is much more complex: it is in conflict with the hegemonic, but it is also constituted by it.

In recent times, pro-ana content has begun to merge with dominant understandings of thinness. As I discussed in chapter three, the content in the pro-ana spaces of old was more manifestly pro-anorexic. For instance, many of these older sites and forums contained warnings that the viewer was about to enter a pro-ana space, and in those

which still exist there are 'about' sections which detail the purpose of the site. In the newer social media spaces however, users' objectives can be more difficult to pinpoint. This is because, as I have argued, users are disguising their spaces in discourses of health and beauty, and inserting disclaimers to deny they are pro-ana. As a result, the counterhegemonic is blurring with the hegemonic.

Pro-ana culture is part of the wider phenomenon of the 'medicalization of cyberspace' whereby the Internet offers a wealth of health services and guidance as well as lay information at the click of a button (see Miah and Rich 2008). This ranges from support forums for chronic pain sufferers who can discuss their experiences alongside like-minded others without fear of being misunderstood for example (see Becker 2013); to a space for euthanasia advocates to plan activism and find an emotional outlet (McDorman 2001); through to pro-suicide groups which provide detailed guidance on how to end one's life and an opportunity to talk over such plans in a non-judgemental space (Westerlund 2012). Pro-anorexia online offers a space for users to communicate with like-minded others, who, for a plethora of reasons, may not feel understood by their friends, family and society at large. The relative anonymity of the web has enabled marginalised persons, such as pro-ana users, to obtain access to information and support, and above all, the opportunity to engage in debate and potentially develop counterpublics (Dahlberg and Siaperä 2007, p.134; McDorman 2001).

For Todd McDorman, 'the virtual nature of the Internet allows those who cannot mobilize physically to participate virtually [...] the public space is constantly refigured by a community of individuals in search of the right tools to challenge state authority' (2001, p.199). It would be a push to argue that users of pro-ana online spaces are actively looking to 'challenge state authority' in the institutional sense. The euthanasia advocates about whom McDorman writes, are seeking to change laws around individuals' right-to-die, whereas, in the data examined in this study, pro-ana users

were not calling for constitutional changes. In spite of this, their online spaces clearly provided them with an outlet they could not find offline. Users of these spaces occupy a number of marginalised positions: firstly their anorexic status means that they are pathologised by society at large; secondly, their embracing of this status ostracises them; thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, pro-anorectics are predominantly female, meaning they are adversely placed within patriarchal society. The relative anonymity of the Internet combined with the reassuring presence of like-minded others therefore provides them with a safe space, at least for a time until their censors block them.

For a counterpublic to be instigated the private must become public and the silenced must speak out. During this process it is not uncommon that groups face criticism and their assertions are conceived of as 'debased narcissism, a collapse of decorum, expressivity gone amok, the erosion of any distinction between public and private' (Warner 2005, p.62). An insistence that certain matters should remain private merely operates as a gagging mechanism and a form of social control. As such, new media technologies can be an emancipating force for counterpublic groups who have been misrepresented by the media (McDorman 2001, p.203). Ironically, it is the calls for censorship and media castigation which have made pro-ana online spaces so visible. That they use social media in the first place suggests that users are open to being seen by broader audiences and, whether unintentionally or not, they have formed their own public. They may have faced immense criticism, but through their use of digital technology users have been able to construct a counter argument, thus co-opting the power of their visibility to draw back, regroup and provide a counter-narrative, as a number of the sites and forums have done.

Pro-ana recovery site, *Let's change this* expresses frustration at the media's distorted depiction of pro-anorexia, as well as what it terms the 'Second-Wave Pro-Ana Movement', whereby users, such as those on social media platforms, present pro-ana as glamorous and 'cool' (2012). In chapter three, I cited pro-ana forum *Thin &*

*Beautiful's* annoyance with the pro-ana trend for 'underwear pics' (2013). These spaces appear to be expressing their exasperation at the postfeminising of their culture, even if they do not describe it as such. At the same time, *Let's change this* refuses the pathologising of anorexia and states that its space is intended for individuals who seek to 'live *with* EDs not *for* them' (*Let's change this* 2012). It even draws on Daphna Yeshua-Katz and Nicole Martins (2013) research on pro-ana to support its claims that pro-ana online spaces can benefit users, despite how the media has portrayed them. Users are acutely aware of the way they are being depicted and are using digital media to respond to this, whether through crafting their own language to evade censorship or making statements to defend their position.

The author of *Ethereal Anas* states on the landing page:

You are entering a pro-ana site. I don't want haters. This is a free world and we chose to be like this. If you need the motivation to continue or feel like you're losing hope, you can come here for help and understanding. I know how difficult it is to tell people how I truly feel and be judged and misunderstood. An Ethereal Ana is just another Ana that doesn't want to be helped, just to be accepted and viewed as a human. We have brains and we can choose for ourselves! (2009)

The author describes a chasm between the help she wants and that which is being forced upon her. She asserts that her site provides support and understanding, contrasted with the ill-judged 'help' imposed from the outside, which she suggests is dehumanising. By stating that she and her fellow pro-anorectics are able to make their own choices, the blogger seeks to reclaim the agency external 'help' has denied her. This statement both disrupts received understandings of anorexia as a passively-endured illness, and responds to a public that has demonised those who resist 'help'. However, it also plays directly into the insidious hands of 'choice feminism' whereby 'positively evaluating women's choices as evidence of women's exercise of freedom the troubled relationship between femininity and feminism is seemingly resolved' (Budgeon 2015, p.306). Pro-ana online spaces such as this may present a critique of

anorexia treatment, but their protests are underpinned by the rhetoric of individualism which is hindering their counterpublic potential.

As a result of pro-ana culture's counterhegemonic approach to eating disorders, academic research has highlighted the transformational possibilities of pro-ana discourse. Pollack (2003, p.249) suggests that 'the anorexic's reappropriation of the psychiatric label could signify an empowering reversal strategy', and Day and Keys (2008a) conclude that although these spaces demonstrate users' conformity to dominant ideals, pro-anorectics are actively creating new meanings around self-starvation (see also Ferreday 2003). Rather than simply consuming media in its original form, pro-ana users actively produce and consume their own artefacts (even if this involves appropriating existing sources). They are what Axel Bruns (2008) terms *producers*: they constitute a group of individuals who are using digital technologies to construct their own representations.

In this way, their online spaces are examples of cultural history which offers valuable insight in to the lived reality of what it means to be a young woman in the twenty-first century. As Aristeia Fotopoulou (2017) found in her ethnography of a queer activist group in Brighton, the group's use of digital technologies, although contested by members, recorded their activity to public memory so that future queer activists might draw upon it. Censorship and deletion mean that archives of the pro-ana phenomenon are incomplete and fragmented, but its narrative still has the potential to be utilised in the formation of a counterpublic. Further, according to Catherine Helen Palczewski, 'what happens within a movement in terms of identity creation, may be as important as, if not more important than, the outward directed rhetoric' (2001, p.166). If nothing else, pro-ana online spaces exemplify the problems faced by young women as they seek to carve out their identities in these confusing times.

In spite of and, arguably because of, the threats of censorship and deletion, pro-ana users remain steadfastly adaptive. From the outset users instigated their own language with the terms ‘pro-anorexia’ and ‘thinspiration’ – coinages which have now entered the vernacular (see chapter three). Following this, as I have shown throughout this thesis, they have developed an expansive vocabulary in an attempt to pre-empt erasure: hashtags such as ‘thynspo’ or ‘blithe’ signal that the discussion is pro-ana, and for some time at least can pass undetected by Internet moderators. The development of a new rhetoric is central to the success of a social movement as it has the effect of challenging and redefining hegemonic discourses (Fraser 1990; Malkowski 2014; Palczewski 2001). However, it is important to highlight *why* pro-ana users adopt their own dissident language. It would be remiss to argue that they set out with the intention of creating their own countermovement; rather, the constant moves to censor their spaces mean they cannot converse in a language readily understood by those in authority. For pro-ana users, coining and modifying hashtags has become a practice of necessity, as opposed to choice.

Olszanowski (2015) proposes four categories which motivate individuals to use hashtags: to find like-minded others, to find inspiration, to participate in challenges and/or communities, and to create an archive of images. The hashtag then can have a unifying effect. But, upon entering wider publics it is vulnerable to appropriation and subsequent derailing (both intended and unintended) as Anna Antonakis-Nashif (2015) found in her study of the feminist hashtag ‘outcry’. #outcry was coined in response to sexism in Germany and when it penetrated the mainstream it prompted wider debate, but it was also mocked, hijacked, and neutralised. Antonakis-Nashif consequently concludes that although hashtags can create empowering spaces, ‘when entering mainstream media, the logics become different, the discourse gets abstracted and less subversive’ (2015 p.108). Her findings echo the response to SlutWalk discussed above, where its politics were all too easily divested by the postfeminist media. Such

distortion is a result of the dynamism of the hegemonic which is ever-ready to incorporate that which may jeopardise its authority (Williams 1977, p.113). Pro-ana online spaces are particularly vulnerable to incorporation by the hegemonic because, although they exhibit counterhegemonic viewpoints, many of their spaces also reproduce dominant ideologies, as earlier chapters of this thesis have demonstrated.

In spite of this, it is important to recognise, as do Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer that, 'inhabitants of marginal identities do not always oppose domination in their activities in wider publics' (2001, p.8). Pro-ana users are marginalised in society because of their approach to disordered eating. Simply because they are predominantly women, this does not automatically mean that they are feminists, let alone that they are intersectional feminists. Drawing on examples such as neo-Nazis and other online white supremacist groups, Dahlberg and Siapera (2007, p.136) dispute the assumption that all counterpublics must be progressive. Whilst these are extreme examples, others, such as Boston's women-led antibusing movement, are more complex.

The antibusing movement which took place in Boston, Massachusetts during the nineteen-seventies saw groups of working-class women protesting against desegregation prompted by what they saw as the need to protect their children's education (Wrigley 1998). Although this activist group appears to be solely fuelled by racism, it is an example of a highly active countermovement where working-class women took the lead. The antibusing activists ultimately failed to form a counterpublic, not because of their reactionary politics, but because they 'had no ideology which would encourage them to see others as supporters' (Wrigley 1998, p.271). It is not uncommon for established social movements themselves to flounder when the 'desire for community [...] produces a clique atmosphere which keeps groups small and turns potential members away' (Young 1990, p.235).



Pro-ana online users have faced such criticism for their hostility to outsiders, leading Brotsky and Giles (2007) to describe the spaces as more of a 'clique' than a community. If a group becomes a clique, it is much less conducive to the formation of a counterpublic whose success relies on an outward-facing approach. The term 'clique' here is instructive; it is not only negative, it is also feminine. In her chapter on 'The Girlfriend Gaze' Winch uses examples of cliques in the 2004 film *Mean Girls* to 'illustrate the complex emotions and systems of control that permeate female sociality in a postfeminist context' (2013, p.9). However, I would argue that all-female groups are more likely to be cast as cliques simply by dint of their being women.

Pro-ana groups may appear exclusive, and this is often a result of their need to filter out what they call 'wannarexics': 'people who want to take part in the community but whose credibility as eating disordered is in doubt' (Boero and Pascoe 2012, p.39). In so doing, users seek to differentiate between those who want genuine support and those who simply want to lose weight. Thus, rather than seeking to persuade new members to join, pro-ana online spaces often use mechanisms which operate to keep the disingenuous out. On their landing page, *World of Pro-ana* for example states: 'This is for people with real eating disorders. NO wannarexics. In *World of Pro-ana* we like to have a positive attitude. Please do not mistake this for promoting eating disorders' (2014).

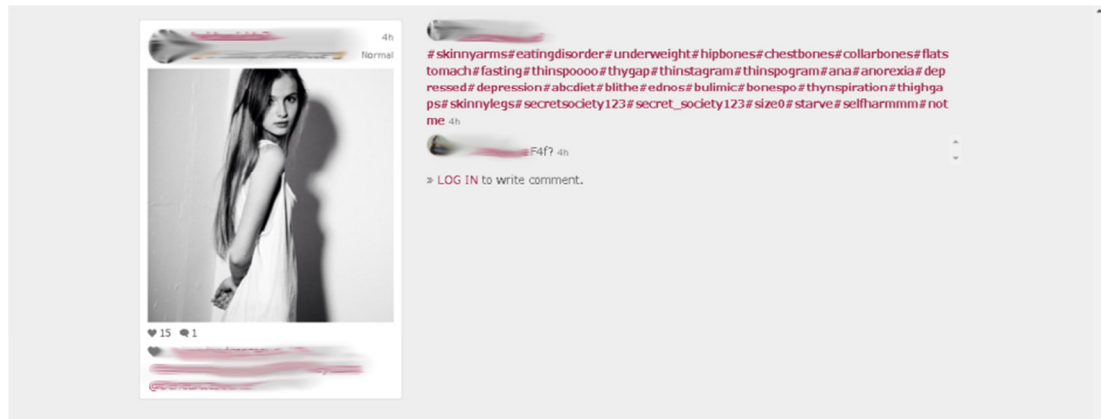
To their credit, pro-ana online spaces are clear about what they do and do not promote. The landing page of forum, *Pro-ana for Me* states, '*Pro-ana for Me* is committed to supporting individuals suffering from, or in recovery from eating disorders or body dysmorphic disorders' (2014). What these types of spaces do, at least in principle, is create a safe place to speak about recovering from or maintaining anorexia, instead of simply accepting it as a disease which can be cured. However, because they are located in a culture where thinness is valued, their attempts to create a boundary

between those who are anorexic and those who want to be extremely thin, are often in vain.

Keen as they are to attract only the genuinely anorexic, as well as being aware of their deviant status in contemporary culture, references to 'secrets' flood pro-ana online spaces, appearing in usernames, hashtags, and comments alluding to secretly starving and holding secret accounts. This accentuates the shameful connotations associated with eating disorders, whilst simultaneously suggesting that secrets are what unite these people. Figure 27 below typifies the circulating of secrets in pro-ana online spaces. A user posts a thinspirational image of a model with a childlike appearance, the attendant hashtags signalling the meaning they attach to it. The hashtags combine allusions to extreme thinness, such as: '#skinnyarms #underweight #hipbones #chestbones #collarbones #flatstomach,' with references to eating disorders including: '#anorexia [...]#ednos #bulimic' as well as: '#depression' and '#selfharmmm'. Again, the user indicates their distance from the image posted by citing, '#notme'. Amongst these hashtags are those to corroborate the post's secret meaning: '#secretsociety123 #secret\_society123'.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, two of the users who 'like' this have secret usernames such as 'secret life of Laura' and 'Tina's secret'. Through 'likes' and further hashtags such a post is then made visible by other clandestine users and broadcast throughout pro-ana and self-harm networks.

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<sup>40</sup> 'secretsociety123' appears in both pro-ana and self-harm posts, operating as a hashtag to unite those who self-starve with those who self-harm.



**Figure 27:** a post generated by a search for #thynspiration on Instagram.

*Pace* posts such as these, like those explored in the previous chapter, make bold statements about the unattainable standards of beauty which circulate in contemporary Western culture; they express the impossibility of achieving these standards and the accompanying misery it can bring. However, rather than enacting a critique against impossible ideals, users imbue them with life-threatening importance, turning their frustration upon themselves. This is symptomatic of the shift from second-wave feminism to present day 'neoliberal feminism [which is] purging itself of all elements that would orient it outwards, towards the public good' (Rottenberg 2014, p.431). Pro-ana users may adopt a counterhegemonic approach to compulsory thinness by tacitly stating that its requirements bear very little difference to their own apparently deviant culture. Nevertheless, they do not communicate beyond their networks, and instead their focus remains on the self.

### **Mobilising the self: *postfeminist counterpublics***

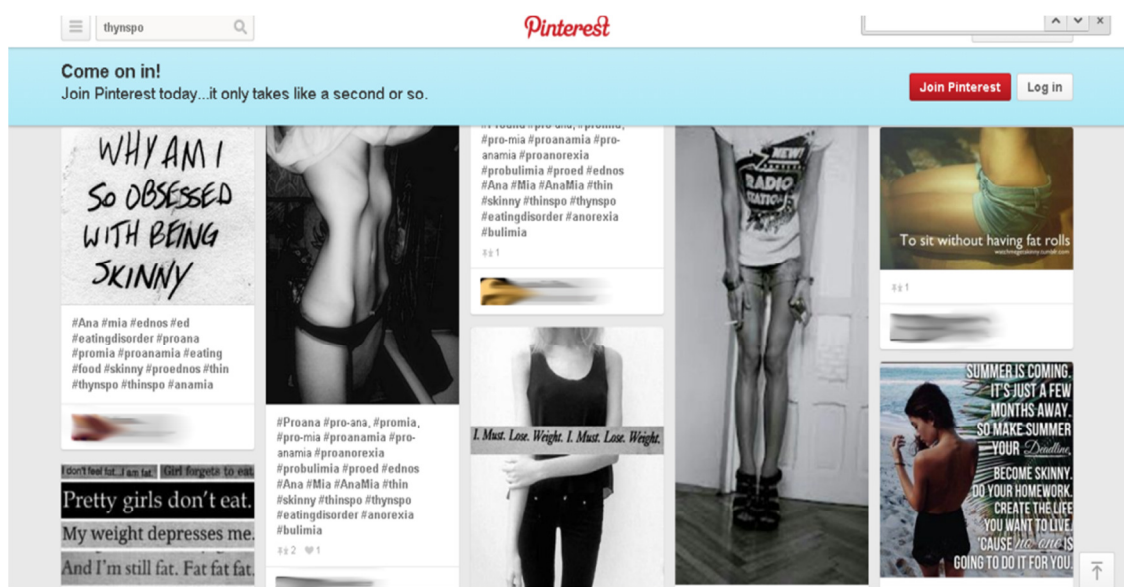
Having explored the counterhegemonic elements of pro-ana online spaces, this section looks more closely at their potential to mobilise a counterpublic movement. Users' individualism need not necessarily be antithetical to the formation of a counterpublic. For as McGee (2005) has argued, it can also be a catalyst for social change, provided that it is founded upon acknowledgment of our shared vulnerabilities, rather than a rigid focus on difference and attempts to transcend human fragility.

As such, I begin this section by looking more closely at Dias's (2003) research into pro-ana sites. Dias asks 'whether women's behavior on these websites may be considered feminist without being overtly political, and conversely whether it can be considered political without being overtly feminist' (2003, p.32). She reads pro-ana sites in light of third-wave feminism, concluding that 'the narratives in third wave collections, like the narratives on pro-anorexia websites, describe individual women's struggles with their identities as well as the contradictory nature of what each of them finds empowering (ibid., p.41). Dias' argument is important and it holds much resonance for the time she was writing – in the early days of the pro-ana phenomenon. However, as I have described, the landscape of pro-ana online has changed considerably, not least because of censorship, but also because of the current postfeminist neoliberal culture in which it is situated.

As a result, I propose a reading of pro-ana online spaces as *postfeminist counterpublics*. The users themselves may not be, to borrow from Dias, overtly political or for that matter, overtly feminist. But, they understand feminism as common-sense (McRobbie 2004) and they use its rhetoric of freedom and choice to support them in their goals for extreme thinness, however problematic that may be. At the same time, their spaces are inherently contradictory and unstable, and their 'grammar of individualism' (Gill 2007a, p.162) means that they are all too readily susceptible to co-optation by postfeminist neoliberalism.

Even the supportive slogans users share with one another invariably centre on the first-person singular, as figure 28 below demonstrates. The pinned posts here range from a user questioning her obsession with 'being skinny', to another declaring 'My weight depresses me. And I'm still fat', and 'I. Must. Lose. Weight' another reiterates. Each post focusses on the individual's all-consuming focus on body weight, and each image depicts a woman alone, encapsulating the solipsism of self-improvement. The longest post on this page summarises pro-anorexia's individualism: 'Become skinny. Do your

homework. Create the life you want to live 'cause *no-one* is going to do it for you'. This post is antithetical to any form of community or solidarity. It tells the reader that they must be self-sufficient and that their future entirely depends upon their own actions. The route to success here is expressed through working hard, both at school and on the body, and these two aspects of life are metonymically presented as leading to happiness. For Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad such contemporary 'exhortations to confidence, self-belief and empowerment [...] repudiate dependence as shameful', and this is the 'lifeblood of neoliberalism' (2015, p.340).



**Figure 28:** results produced by a search for 'thynspo' on Pinterest.

In these posts, there is an implicit repudiation of the fat body and an understanding of adiposity as synonymous with laziness, as the coupling of being skinny and doing homework implies. Their continual castigation of fat means pro-ana users are unlikely to connect with other groups who are marginalised because of their body type. In spite of this, fat women and anorectics have more in common than initially appears. In Western culture the [pro-]anorectic 'who starves herself to stave off cultural notions of dependency and weakness associated with fatness ends up having those same abhorred qualities projected upon her' (Saukko 1999, p.44). However both groups are rendered inimical to one another by a culture which admires slenderness and is hostile towards fat (McKinley 1999, p.110). This, combined with the notion that 'femininity in a

neoliberal postfeminist society is promoted as a performance that one wins at' (Winch 2013, p.157), makes potential alliances further challenging.

As Wolf suggests the 'core of the [beauty] myth – and the reason it was so useful as a counter to feminism – is its divisiveness' (1991, p.284). If these divisions could be overcome, pro-ana advocates could engage with 'Fat Acceptance'<sup>41</sup> online for instance and launch an online counterpublic which could contribute towards actual social change. Such a coalition could present an affront to problematic cultural understandings of women's bodies as too fat, too thin, and in need of constant surveillance. A successful social movement must be premised on the uniting of disparate groups to create a cohesive front. Thus, marginalised groups, in seeking out common ground may find opportunity to organise through their shared experience. At the same time though, it is important to appreciate that 'the "proliferation of subaltern counter publics' (Fraser, 1992: 69–70)" does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces' (Downey and Fenton 2003, p.194).

It has been argued that the impact of the size acceptance movement has been on a small scale and has not yet led to significant social change (Sobal 1999). Perhaps this is in part because the Fat Acceptance movement is said to be largely US-based and 'remains predominantly white, middle class, and highly educated' (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012, p.417). Moreover, NAAFA (The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) has been charged with 'reinforc[ing] rather than undermin[ing] the cultural fear and repudiation of fat (Gimlin 2002), and the online Body Positive Movement with 'foster[ing] corporeal performances that all too readily become mimetic of the very norms they seek to counter' (Sastre 2014b, p.931). Although these groups may offer social support and acceptance, they currently fail to be critical of the wider ways in which the body is constructed (Gimlin 1999; Sastre 2014b; Sobal 1999). In accepting

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example #fatacceptance on Tumblr. These spaces work similarly to those of pro-ana: they position a body that has historically been vilified and pathologised, as beautiful, posting images with motivational slogans and hashtags.

and being positive about fat, these groups provide members with crucial coping mechanisms and support (see Smith, Wickes, and Underwood 2015), but in terms of a social movement, their critique is not deep enough and their reach does not extend far enough.

In a similar vein to Fat Acceptance, a number of anorexia recovery spaces and hashtags have emerged in direct response to the pro-ana phenomenon. These spaces conceive anorexia as a battle to be fought and won. This suggests that pro-ana, by contrast, connotes weakness and submission to the illness. Recovery users adopt hashtags such as 'edsoldier' or 'edwarrior' and 'fight' or 'beatana'. This conceptualising of the anorexic experience as a heroic battle often occurs in eating disorder narratives (see for example Gooldin 2008) and recovery discourse (see Holmes 2016). However, it is yoked by a repudiation of anorexia and a privileging of masculine autonomy as conferred through the metaphor of the soldier or warrior. Such an approach is ultimately damaging and feeds back into the discourses which construct anorexia in the first place: the "male" virtues of control and self-mastery' (Bordo 2003, pp.171-2; see also MacSween 1993).

According to McGee, 'it is our culture's fantasy of a disengaged, masterful, rational and controlling self that creates the possibilities for endless and futile self-improvement' (2005, p.173). Therefore, the [pro-]anorectic is in an impossible situation. The warrior approach to eating disorders suggests that the only solution is to overcome them through personal strength, thereby ensuring that the onus is on the individual and implying that those who do not have failed. This subsequently reinforces the longstanding social construction of women as 'weak, dependent, and diseased' (Ehrenreich and English 1979, p.92) and all the negative associations these attributes entail.

Other hashtags such as #antiana #antiproana #prorecovery may not always adopt warrior discourses, but the content yielded often takes the form of direct affronts to pro-ana spaces where users combine anti-ana hashtags with pro-ana hashtags in order to gain visibility in the latter space. For instance, in a #thynspo search on Tumblr, a user posts a statement against pro-ana culture, asserting, 'Ana is not a person. Stop referring to anorexia as 'Ana'. Anorexia will not help you' (2014) They then apply the following hashtags: 'antiproanabullshit antiproana antipromia' as well as 'proana promia thinspo thynspo' (ibid.).

In their research into pro-recovery, Elad Yom-Tov et al (2012) found that when pro-recovery groups impose their stance on pro-ana spaces, the latter merely become more entrenched in their pro-ana standpoint. As such, these individuals do not engage in the debate required to create a public in the Habermasian sense, rather they exist in enclaves where they reinforce one another's viewpoints. This is what James W. Carey describes as a 'ritual view of communication' (2009, p.15). The ritual view 'operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds, but to represent an underlying order of things' (ibid.). Such rigidity ultimately cannot enrich the public sphere.

A number of spaces take a more gentle approach to pro-ana and recovery, such as *Ana no more*, a site and forum which describes itself as 'post-proana' and refuses the label of 'anti-proana' ('post-proana' 2012). Its approach is admirable in that it will not judge pro-ana sites or users and it is open to debate around different ways of managing eating disorders. However, it views them as culturally-isolated phenomena and does not seek to critique wider discourses around compulsory thinness. In the same way, there are aspects of pro-ana online spaces which are therapeutic and provide much-needed support for those with anorexia (Tierney 2008; Yeshua-Katz and Martins 2012; Smith, Wickes, and Underwood 2015), but this is not to say that they necessarily challenge thinness culture.



In spite of this, pro-ana online spaces constitute tacit recognition that something is culturally wrong, and this must be recognised. They blur the boundaries between what it means to be hegemonically thin and attractive and what it means to be anorexic, illustrating that there is very little difference in either category. It has been argued that in contemporary culture, anorexia operates as the frontier at which thinness is no longer desirable and has become pathological (Ferreday 2009, p.202). I argue that the very notion of a phenomenon which is *pro-anorexia* and utilises media images of thin women to inspire self-starvation, disrupts this binary and asks important questions about the meanings of thinness. As a result, it contains the potential to launch a meaningful critique of the thin ideal but, in these postfeminist neoliberal times, its political potential is being thwarted.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the extent to which pro-ana online spaces can be considered counterpublics. To do so, I first interrogated a set of women-led publics, exploring their counterhegemonic elements and the extent to which they operate as counterpublics. I showed how the lesbian separatists ultimately lacked engagement with wider publics as well as an intersectional approach. This meant that, as a counterpublic, they were only partly successful. I explored how SlutWalks, as well as failing on an intersectional level, had their politics neutralised by the postfeminist media. I suggested that *Mumsnet*, whilst operating as a lively public, ultimately did little to challenge the status quo. Finally, I attended to TLC's resistance to NBCAM, an example of a counterpublic which exemplifies the multiplicity of counterpublics required to enrich the public sphere. I then turned to pro-ana online spaces themselves, approaching them in two sections.

Firstly, I argued how these spaces are counterhegemonic. Through networked technologies, users circulate counter-discourses and have created a vast and dynamic

movement. They operate in contradistinction to dominant ideologies around health and medicine and they counter traditional understandings of anorexia as an illness to be treated. In so doing, they challenge the notion of femininity as essentially passive. They craft their own rhetoric and they refuse to be silenced. Furthermore, they collate images of thin celebrities, low-fat recipes, and dieting advice and frame it as pro-anorexic. This exposes the toxicity of compulsory thinness culture. The images in these spaces may appear shocking and the advice dangerous, but I argue, so is that which appears in the mainstream. Pro-ana texts reveal such insidiousness, and this has the potential to redress understandings not only of anorexia, but body politics more widely.

In the second section, I argued that whilst pro-ana spaces contain counterpublic potential, they do not entirely fulfil its requirements because of the postfeminist neoliberal context in which they currently find themselves. As such, I proposed that they should be read as *postfeminist counterpublics*. Pro-ana users' online raging, their hashtagging of images and their labelling of certain bodies as anorexic all constitute important cultural statements which speak volumes about femininity in contemporary society. They may espouse hegemonic femininity, but they also advocate women's rights to control over their bodies. It is this latter element of the phenomenon which must be mobilised in order to create a successful counterpublic movement, lest the all-powerful hegemonic consumes it.

As it stands though, postfeminism is relentless in its undermining of feminist collectivism, preferring to frame it as ugly and outdated (McRobbie 2004, 2009; Scharff 2012), rather than an opportunity for women to come together against that which divides them. Hence, pro-ana online culture in its current form is too closely aligned with the normative femininity embraced by postfeminism. Women unite by imparting tips on weight loss, or find friendship through shared understandings of the impossibility of their quest. They may come together under the goal of physical improvement, but it is a goal which is ultimately damaging. As Bartky (2004, p.23)

warns 'unless new forms of female solidarity appear, women will be loathe to abandon the forms they know'. This new form of solidarity must allow women to come together in ways that do not damage their health or uphold painful gender norms.

Communication is key to the formation of an effective counterpublic; however, pro-ana spaces operate more as enclaves where users may speak *against* dominant understandings of anorexia, but they do not speak *out*. Over time their spaces have begun to merge with dominant discourses rather than counter them. This is not only the result of pro-ana users' lack of engagement with wider publics, but also the antagonistic way in which their spaces have been handled by the media, Internet moderators and society at large. The blurred boundaries between mainstream and pro-ana discourse that I have been speaking to throughout this thesis mean that where the ideals and ideas of the pro-ana public engage with the broader public, this engagement occurs as a form of depoliticised appropriation rather than negotiation.

Ultimately, in their current configuration pro-ana online spaces fall short of creating a dialogue which could potentially advocate for a better understanding of the culture of compulsory thinness. However, like the case studies examined at the start of this chapter, the counterhegemonic activity of pro-ana online spaces tells an important story about the gender politics of the time.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has argued that the thin ideal in pro-ana online spaces should be seen as operating on the same continuum as mainstream representations of hegemonic thinness in Western culture. Through my analysis of the pro-ana phenomenon, I have demonstrated that whilst this culture has been framed as controversial and even dangerous, it circulates discourses which coincide with those perpetuated by the same mainstream that pathologises and demonises it. I have therefore suggested that pro-ana online spaces present an affront to the culture of compulsory thinness. Through their diffusion of images and advice which they mark as pro-ana, through websites, forum discussions or hashtags, these spaces tacitly point out that the line between anorexia and ideal thinness is increasingly blurred. However, as my critical enquiries revealed, the political potential of pro-ana online is being hampered by the postfeminist neoliberal climate in which it is located. As a phenomenon, and even as a concept, pro-ana is a critique of the thin ideal, however, those who partake in it are not mobilised.

## **Key findings and contribution**

In the introduction to this thesis I identified two interventions this research sought to make: the first was methodological and set out to capture pro-ana data at a time when the changes in the phenomenon have led to its culture becoming normalised. Linked to this, the second intervention was to demonstrate that such normalisation situates pro-ana online spaces within the context of postfeminist neoliberalism. Borne out of these central contributions I made a number of other interventions as I will now describe.

It was in chapter three that I set out my methodological approach, showing how this became a research finding itself. During the research process I encountered a number of obstacles which were indicative of the subject I was investigating. I demonstrated how the pro-ana landscape morphed from a website and forum-based phenomenon, to

one which is predominantly played out on social media. Reflecting on this shift, I identified the fact that pro-ana online spaces have changed for two principle reasons: censorship and new forms of image-centric social media. Censorship by Internet moderators has meant that pro-ana users have developed creative methods in order to simultaneously deny and disguise pro-ana sentiments. This is through for instance, the coining of hashtags to disguise pro-ana content – a device which means users are able to evade the censoring of key terms, until moderators recognise the content as pro-ana and block the hashtag. Users also overtly deny that their space is pro-anorexic. This is enacted through the placing of disclaimers on blogs or inserting their spaces within discourses of health and beauty.

I argue that this dovetails with the imperative to body disciplining explored in chapters one and two. In chapter one I showed how the medical gaze operates as a form of social control. By presenting the maintenance of a healthy body as personal responsibility and moral obligation, the population is rendered self-regulatory. I suggested that pro-ana online users disguise their spaces in similar ways and, in so doing, comment upon the absurdity of normative body management. When body disciplining is espoused by the medical profession, it is considered legitimate, but when pro-ana users endorse it, it is framed as pathological.

This first chapter illustrated, through secondary research, how female disorders in history came to be seen as examples of feminine norms. If anorexia and hysteria were the disordered norms of the nineteenth century, *pro-ana* is the disordered norm of the twenty-first century. It may contain the potential for resistance, but its proximity to normative feminine body disciplining renders it susceptible to servicing a culture that relies on women's subservience. Chapter one, therefore, began to interrogate the possibilities for critique in pro-ana online spaces. I suggested that, through their defiance of medical authority and appropriation of its discourses, these spaces have the potential to expose the thin ideal and the gendered norms upon which it operates.

Pro-ana online spaces not only appropriate medical discourse, they also draw on discourses of thinness which emerge from popular culture. As such, in chapter two I attended to disciplining of the female body in the contemporary UK women's magazine. Here, I began to illustrate the blurred boundaries between mainstream culture and pro-ana online. The magazines, I argued, perpetuate mutual self-surveillance as necessary to realising normative femininity. They promote the primacy of the individual at the cost of the collective action and they suggest that the reader herself is in charge of her own destiny. At the same time, the women who adorn these texts operate as warnings to police readers' practices. As a result, I proposed that the contemporary UK women's magazine operates as a postfeminist, neoliberal false friend which, like the medical gaze preceding it, maintains a scrutinising regard over women under the pretence of looking out for them.

In this second chapter, I introduced my central critical framework: postfeminist neoliberalism. I showed how this 'sensibility' (Gill 2007a) operates via practical application to data from the mainstream. In subsequent chapters, I was then able to illustrate how the postfeminist neoliberal discourses present in women's magazines are played out in pro-ana online spaces. For instance, the contradictory postfeminist subject of the women's magazine denies that she is dieting, yet simultaneously promotes a slender ideal. Pro-ana online spaces deny that they are pro-ana, whilst venerating extreme thinness. Furthermore, pro-ana culture constructs an ideal body which is adumbrated by the magazines' repudiation of bodies which are not slim, white, middle-class and heterofeminine.

I interrogated this ideal in depth in chapter four where I addressed the intersectional politics of pro-ana online spaces. I argued that, in spite of research confirming that anorexia does not only affect young, white, middle-class women, pro-ana online spaces suggest that it does. I used intersectionality as my critical paradigm to reveal how the seeming neutrality of postfeminist neoliberalism privileges white, middle-class

heterofemininity. My analysis illustrated the ways in which the thin body is represented as antithetical to the racialised and lower-class 'other'. Through examples of the 'lovely' celebrities pro-ana spaces admire and of those they denigrate, I demonstrated how thinness as an ideal is tied to middle-class, white femininity. Importantly, pro-ana users communicate this aspirational femininity through appropriation of images and discourses from the mainstream.

For instance, I illustrated how users espouse a privileged lifestyle as a means of achieving ideal thinness. They promote the consumption of expensive foods and fashionable clothing as necessary accompaniments to the slender body. This privileged lifestyle was presented in two different ways in the data examined. For some, it involved the use of cheerful self-help and motivational rhetoric which complemented images of women in brightly-coloured clothing. For others, it comprised espousal of a grunge aesthetic as indicated by images of women dressed in grunge-style clothing and attendant statements of self-hatred and depression. However, I suggested that these two very different manifestations of pro-ana culture are both underpinned by discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism, and as such, they are informed by privilege. In sum, this chapter showed that the ideal pro-ana subject bears a striking resemblance to the ideal postfeminist subject.

The convergence of normative femininity and pro-ana femininity may allow pro-ana online spaces to hide in plain sight but, it also offers an opportunity to identify the contradictions within compulsory thinness, and in turn, critique it. Thus, in chapters five and six I began to explore pro-ana culture's political potential in depth. In chapter five, I examined how pain and suffering was negotiated in the performance of the pro-ana subject. I showed how pro-ana online spaces draw on cultural representations of femininity over time which centre on suffering. I asked if, in so doing, they might enact an exposé of painful femininity.

I identified two juxtaposing discourses of pain operating in pro-ana online spaces. On the one hand, pain was presented as a worthwhile investment with the mantra of ‘no pain, no gain’ being repeated throughout. Such an address chimes with the neoliberal subject who constantly works to better her body and herself and, by presenting suffering in this way, users obscured its painful reality. On the other hand, pain was portrayed as lamentable and was accompanied by references to depression, anger, and self-harm. Users wrote candidly of the suffering associated with anorexia. However, they ultimately turned this pain on themselves. They did not direct their anger at the culture of compulsory thinness, instead, they raged at their own bodies and despaired that the thin ideal was ‘#notme’. As a result, I argued that although both these discourses of pain – the upbeat and the despairing – emphasise the suffering required of normative femininity, they do not ultimately critique it.

In spite of this, pro-ana texts constitute an important cultural archive that speaks to, and about, twenty-first century femininity. This archive exposes the extent to which denial and disguise pervade the culture of compulsory thinness and it reveals the blurred boundaries between disordered and normative body practices. Although this may not be intentional on the part of the users of these spaces, it is nonetheless an important – as well as worrying – statement. Therefore, in chapter six I asked if the counterhegemonic stance of pro-ana online spaces could be harnessed to create a counterpublic. To do this, I first interrogated a selection of women-led publics, exploring the extent to which they could be considered counterpublics. From here, I examined the counterhegemonic elements of pro-ana culture and their potential to enact a counterpublic movement, suggesting that their individualism was impeding such potential.

In the final section of this chapter, I questioned how this inward-looking self might be mobilised for the greater good. I proposed that pro-ana online spaces are ultimately *postfeminist counterpublics*, suggesting that their political potential is stymied by the



postfeminist context in which they sit. Although the pro-ana phenomenon contains the potential to destabilise contemporary thinness culture, I argued that upon entering wider publics, the language of pro-ana has become vulnerable to distortion and appropriation and its original messages are often lost. This chapter therefore concluded that whilst all counterpublics are vulnerable to incorporation by the hegemonic, pro-ana online spaces are particularly susceptible. This is because, as I have illustrated throughout this thesis, they perpetuate bodily ideals which coincide with those which are espoused by the mainstream.

As it stands, mainstream thinness culture and pro-ana online spaces are locked in a dance with one another. They appropriate one another's texts and adopt similar discourses. This I argue, whether intentionally or not, makes a bold statement about the current bodily ideals demanded of women. If pro-ana users are appropriating mainstream texts to support them in their quest for extreme thinness, then there is clearly a problem with what constitutes normative thinness. At the same time, the mainstream co-optation of pro-ana emphasises this further. In a culture which continually seeks to incorporate dissident voices, one which has plundered punk culture, grunge style, and even the aesthetics of heroin users, why should pro-anorexia or 'Concentration Camp Chic' come as a surprise? Pro-ana culture may operate at the margins, but it offers an important interpretation of what it means to strive for normative femininity in the twenty-first century.

### **Critical reflection: the darker side of postfeminism**

When I began this research, I anticipated being shocked by the images my data collection would yield. I was prepared to be astounded by the bizarre tips and tricks pro-ana users would share with one another in order to lose weight. I was expecting to be horrified by pro-ana, but I was not. What did disturb me was how familiar I found the images and the advice. To begin with, I was even dismissive of my results. I was

concerned that my data was, in effect, too *normal* to be pro-ana. It was during this period that I met investigative journalist, Jamie Bartlett. Bartlett was finishing his book, *The Dark Net*, which comprised an exploration of the hidden Internet. He describes the dark net as:

an idea more than a particular place: an underworld set apart yet connected to the internet we inhabit, a world of complete freedom and anonymity, and where users say and do what they like, often uncensored, unregulated, and outside of society's norms. (2014, p.3)

He situates pro-ana sites in this underworld, alongside pro-suicide sites, drug dealers and political extremists, for example. Meeting Bartlett marked a turning point in my research. The pro-ana online spaces I was seeing did not arise from the underworld, nor did they operate 'outside of society's norms'. Rather, they were sitting on the surface of the web, flanked by fashion blogs and fitness sites. What these spaces were showing me was not dark side of the net, but the darker side of postfeminism.

Pro-ana culture speaks volumes, not only about femininity, but also about feminist politics in the twenty-first century. In chapter two of this thesis I pointed out, as Gill (2016) does, the importance of continued attention to postfeminism. This study underlines such a need. The data I examined showed no regard for feminism: it did not arise as a topic of conversation in the forums I found, nor was it addressed in any of the social media spaces. However, this does not mean that feminism has not played a role in the formation of the pro-ana phenomenon. As I have outlined, postfeminism does not constitute a backlash against feminism (McRobbie 2009), nor I argue does pro-ana culture. As a result, I suggest that pro-ana online spaces are a product of feminism as well as a representation of its repudiation (cf. Scharff 2012). In other words, they epitomise the current contradictory cultural stance on women's bodies: a perspective which suggests that women have the freedom to look as they wish, whilst, at the same time, promoting conformity to a suffocating ideal.

This contradictory combination is also played out in anorexia itself where the anorectic's bid for freedom ultimately enslaves her. This means that anorexia and postfeminist neoliberalism are perfect – and lethal – companions, adopting as they do a logic which centres upon self-discipline and individualisation. I suggest that this goes some way towards explaining the current phenomenon of pro-ana. Pro-ana is anorexia with a postfeminist neoliberal veneer. Even in its early days, it sought to cloak disordered eating in the rhetoric of empowerment. Now, in a bid to stay online and avoid castigation, it has embraced such discourses wholesale. As such, pro-anorexia is quintessentially postfeminist. It has selected and co-opted elements of feminism which are useful for its own ends, and it presents striving towards an unreachable ideal as a form of empowerment. Both pro-ana and postfeminist cultures seek to transform painful and debilitating activities into pleasurable acts of self-improvement. Ultimately, pro-anorexia is both constituted by, and a metaphor for, postfeminism.

As I illustrated above, some users have declared themselves 'post-proana' and are seeking a new wave of eating-disorders support. There is certainly potential in their non-judgemental approach to both anorexia and pro-anorexia. However, at the time of writing, their online presence is being dwarfed by pro-ana content. Although it would be hopeful to believe that we are entering a period which is post-proana, sadly, it does not appear that this will happen in the near future. Furthermore, it would be hasty to declare the end of pro-ana and it would undermine the experiences of the women who obtain therapeutic value from it. The very concept of a phenomenon that is pro-actively embracing anorexia and uses mainstream images and advice to do so, demands continued attention. To say that it was a phase that now has passed is and is no longer needed, is as dangerous as it is to censor pro-ana content. Ultimately we cannot be truly post-proana until, to use Gill's (2016) term, we are 'post-postfeminism'.

## **Limitations and directions for future research**

This thesis, as I emphasised early on, constitutes a snapshot in time of a dynamic and elusive online phenomenon. Although I have suggested that this makes the study itself an important cultural artefact, it also means that it cannot be exhaustive. No sooner had I created an archive of pro-ana data, much of the original content had been removed from the Internet. Some posts and sites may have been forcibly erased and their authors banished; others may have left of their own accord. Either way, the pro-ana landscape is not what it was when I captured this data. In the time it took to complete this thesis, pro-ana users have continued to develop new hashtags, create new spaces, and ensure that images appear every day – all of which are vulnerable to deletion and vilification. Meanwhile, media reports criticising the phenomenon continue to circulate.

As such, the limits of my own research constitute a recommendation for future research; that investigation into pro-ana online spaces continues. As the denial and disguise I found in my own interrogation of these spaces persists, the phenomenon is merging with the mainstream and ever more losing its political potential to unmask the culture of compulsory thinness which pervades the Western world. One way that thinness culture can be challenged is through sustained critical investigation into the culturally-pivotal spaces that constitute pro-ana online. They may espouse postfeminist compliance with compulsory thinness, but they also adopt counterhegemonic discourses which represent a protest against such an ideal.

A second direction for future research emerges from chapter four of this thesis. This chapter demonstrated the need for an intersectional approach to pro-ana online. Consequently, research into these spaces which takes those who are underrepresented in pro-ana culture as its starting point would be a worthwhile study. As I argued in the introduction, this thesis focussed on women. This is because my

initial searches led me to an abundance of spaces which centred on the female body and the experiences of women. Nonetheless, as I pointed out, there is ‘male pro-ana’ content to be found and it deserves critical investigation. Furthermore, when I began this research I was interested in seeing if pro-ana users were queering the thin body. However, as I have shown, these spaces situate cis-gendered heterosexuality as the norm. Therefore, a study which examines LGBTQ+ persons’ engagement with pro-ana online spaces would be valuable.

Finally, this research centred upon a Western context. As a result of my own position as an English-speaking Westerner living in the UK, the data gathered was limited to that which was in the English language. However, during the collection period, pro-ana content in French, Spanish, and Russian, for instance, was generated. As I have argued, anorexia is not a solely Western phenomenon, yet the data I examined suggests that *pro-anorexia* is. By exploring data collected in non-Western contexts and in languages other than English, one could usefully interrogate how the Western ideal of thinness (white, young, middle-class, and heterofeminine) was negotiated. After all, anorexia, like the thin ideal, is culture-borne and culturally-constituted; only with a continued focus on the contexts from which such ‘disorders’ arise, can we begin to understand how they become ‘normal’.

### **Concluding remarks: the future of (post)feminism**

I would like to end this thesis with a brief discussion on the future of (post)feminist politics. As I complete this project, Donald Trump has been sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. One of his first acts as President was to sign an anti-abortion executive order preventing funding to international NGOs who provide abortion support or services (Graves 2017). The future for women’s rights over their own bodies looks bleak and, as always, it is the poor and marginalised who will suffer the most. However, just two days earlier, in protest against Trump’s politics and wider

issues of gender inequality, women across the globe took part in what is being dubbed 'the largest demonstration in US history' (Frostenson 2017). *The Women's March on Washington* website states that there were 673 marches across the globe, amounting to nearly five million participants (Sister Marches 2017).

Throughout Trump's campaign, there has been an avowedly feminist backlash and interestingly much of it has come from social media and women's magazines. *Teen Vogue* declared that Trump was 'gaslighting'<sup>42</sup> America', arguing that he won the election by 'normalizing deception' (Duca 2016). *Cosmopolitan* has thrown doubt on Trump's daughter Ivanka's interest in women's issues, suggesting that she is unlikely to influence her father's policy-making around women and probably has little interest in doing so (Filipovic 2017). Ivanka Trump is the embodiment of postfeminist neoliberalism, and an article in *Elle* magazine all but states this: Sady Doyle elegantly asserts that Ivanka Trump's 'work isn't feminism, it's femvertising', pointing out that '[Ivanka has] helped make a self-confessed sexual predator who ran the most openly misogynist presidential campaign in modern history palatable to a large number of Americans' (2016). In short, contemporary mainstream women's media is not holding back on its criticism of the patriarchy.

We are currently in a climate which has a renewed focus on the politics of feminism. However, the bastardisation of feminism is occurring on an unprecedented level too. The commentary on Trump by *Teen Vogue* in particular is promising and may represent a shift in the magazine market's approach to social justice issues more widely. At the same time, it is important to recognise that texts such as *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue* rely on advertising to sell copies and sell copies they must. What I want to say is that in these neoliberal times we must be cognisant that feminism can be all too easily co-opted into supporting the status quo. We must

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<sup>42</sup> 'Gaslighting', as Duca succinctly puts it, is 'to psychologically manipulate a person to the point where they question their own sanity' (2016). Gaslighting finds its origins in personal, domestic relationships, yet Duca shows how it is being carried out on the macro level.

continue to ask who is being addressed by these politically-aware magazines. In other words, do they pay attention to intersectional marginalisation? Are they speaking to young women of colour whose experiences mean they have been side-lined by a feminist politics which only services the white, middle-class? Or in truth, is it the Ivanka Trumps of the world whom they address?

This thesis has shown how a phenomenon with the potential to critique the status quo is being incorporated into the mainstream. In these troubling times of fake news, alt-facts, and post-truth politics, it appears that obfuscatory tactics are pervading contemporary culture more than ever. As a result, we must continue to question that which critiques the hegemony as much we question the hegemony itself.

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## Appendix: information on pro-ana online spaces

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**Table 1:** frozen spaces

Name	Type of site	Domain
<i>Anamiaworld</i>	static website and private forum	Self-hosted
<i>Anything for Thin</i>	blog	Google (blogger.com)
<i>Ethereal Anas</i>	static website and private forum	Webs.com
<i>Fallen Ana</i>	static website and public forum	Freewebs
<i>Guide to Ana</i>	static website	Weebly.com
<i>Kneeling to Ana</i>	static website	Webs.com
<i>Living pro-ana</i>	blog	Google (blogger.com)

<i>Thin &amp; Beautiful</i>	static website, public forum, and private forum	Self-hosted
<i>Thin &amp; Beautiful 2</i>	static website, public forum, and private forum	Self-hosted
<i>Thinspo HQ</i>	static website and private forum	Self-hosted
<i>Thinspo NOW</i>	static website	Self-hosted

**Table 2:** active spaces

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of site</b>	<b>Domain</b>
<i>A1 Thinspo</i>	static website	Self-hosted
<i>All for Ana</i>	blog	Google (blogger.com)
<i>Futurethinspo</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Heartthinspo</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Howtothinspo</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Land of Skinny</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>	public forum, and private forum	Self-hosted

<i>Sunny Thinspo</i>	blog	We heart it
<i>Sunshine Thinspiration</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Thinspirationpics</i>	bulletin board	Reddit
<i>Wasting for Thin</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>Workingforthin</i>	blog	Tumblr
<i>World of Pro-ana</i>	static website and public forum	Livejournal
<i>Your thinspo</i>	blog	Tumblr

**Table 3:** marketing spaces

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of site</b>	<b>Domain</b>
<i>30 Days to Thin</i>	static website	Self-hosted
'Membership'	section on static website, <i>A1 Thinspo</i>	Self-hosted
<i>Pro Ana Thinspiration</i>	static website	Self-hosted
<i>Pro Ana Tips</i>	blog	Wordpress
<i>Prothinspiration Diet</i>	static website	Self-hosted
<i>Tangerine Monday</i>	static website	Self-hosted
<i>Thinspiration</i>	blog	Wordpress

<i>Thinspiration Pro Ana Tips</i>	static website	HugeDomains
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**Table 4:** recovery spaces

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of site</b>	<b>Domain</b>
<i>Ana no more</i>	public forum and private forum	Wordpress
<i>Let's change this</i>	static website and private forum	Webring

**Table 5:** hashtag and keyword searches across social media platforms

<b>Hashtag or keyword</b>	<b>Platform</b>	<b>Query</b>
ana	Instagram (Webstagram)	web.stagram.com /tag/ana/
bonespo	Instagram (Webstagram)	web.stagram.com /tag/bonespo/
bonespo	Pinterest	www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=bonespo

bonespo	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/bonespo">www.tumblr.com /search/bonespo</a>
pro-ana	Pinterest	<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=pro-ana">www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=pro-ana</a>
proanna	Instagram (Webstagram)	<a href="http://web.stagram.com/tag/proanna/">web.stagram.com /tag/proanna/</a>
proanna	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/proanna">www.tumblr.com /search/proanna</a>
proanorexia	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/proanorexia">www.tumblr.com /search/proanorexia</a>
pro-anorexia	Pinterest	<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=pro-anorexia">www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=pro-anorexia</a>
thin	Instagram (Webstagram)	<a href="http://web.stagram.com/tag/thin/">web.stagram.com /tag/thin/</a>
thinspiration	Pinterest	<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=thinspiration">www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=thinspiration</a>

thinspiration	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/thinspiration">www.tumblr.com /search/thinspiration</a>
thinspo	Pinterest	<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=thinspo">www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=thinspo</a>
thinspo	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/thinspo">www.tumblr.com /search/thinspo</a>
thinspoooo	Instagram (Webstagram)	<a href="http://web.stagram.com/tag/thinspoooo/">web.stagram.com /tag/thinspoooo/</a>
thinspoooo	Pinterest	<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=thinspoooo">www.pinterest.com /search/pins/?q=thinspoooo</a>
thinspoooo	Tumblr	<a href="http://www.tumblr.com/search/thinspoooo">www.tumblr.com /search/thinspoooo</a>
thynspiration	Instagram (Webstagram)	<a href="http://web.stagram.com/tag/thynspiration/">web.stagram.com /tag/thynspiration/</a>

**Table 6:** other sites

Name	Type of site	Domain
<i>Skinny Gossip</i>	static website, public forum, private forum	Self-hosted

**Table 7:** forum and discussion threads

Title of thread or discussion post	Forum name
'All that glitters'	<i>thinspirationpics</i>
'Ana talk'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>
'depression'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>
'fasting'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>
'hate my body'	<i>World of Pro-ana</i>
'KendallJenner'	<i>Skinny Gossip</i>
'Kendall thinspo?'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>
'My Day'	<i>World of Pro-ana</i>
'post-proana'	<i>Ana no more</i>
'the benefits of being skinny'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>
'the cons of being skinny'	<i>Pro-ana for Me</i>



'What do you guys think?'	<i>thinspirationpics</i>
'Wow'	<i>Thinspirationpics</i>